

increasingly lost their bond with nature and gave them the ability to destroy themselves "free of charge".

The next two days were filled with restless restlessness. In the radio master's office, I had a rough introduction to the radio equipment. At 9.30 a.m. I took off on an orientation flight with Helmut and an on-board radio operator. I was surprised myself at how confidently I was able to work with my "own bearings" after just a few attempts; on the fourth or fifth attempt, the deviations were only minimal, although the radio operator had me change beacons several times. Despite the high speed of the DO 17 Z I was using, I achieved very accurate results. In the afternoon we practiced the same thing again with a He 111, combined with a test of the imaging equipment.

The day after next the weather was better and we took off for a high-altitude training flight. We stayed for almost two hours at an altitude of more than 8000 meters without anyone having any problems. On the contrary, I myself felt really well afterwards. In the late afternoon we received the order that we had to stand by immediately and were no longer allowed to leave our accommodation.

Confused and exciting dreams accompanied my sleep the following night! I woke up feeling exhausted. A glance at the clock: damn, I had overslept. There was complete silence in the accommodation. In the mess hall, the breakfast tables had already been cleared, but without much ado, one of the orderlies set one of the small tables. A tall first lieutenant sat down next to me after a friendly "Good morning". I hadn't seen him before. After a few trivial words, he asked me:

"Are you Mr. P.?"

"Yes, Mr. Lieutenant!" I said with a twinge of bad conscience.

"It's a pleasure to meet you already. I found out a few minutes ago that you have been assigned to me as an aerial observer. My name is Heinrich."

"You, Lieutenant?" I said, somewhat surprised.

"Why are you surprised?"

"To be honest, I overslept and therefore don't even know what has happened today."

"Well, let's get going. We'll fly to another airfield this morning, where we'll take over our plane." We quickly went to the commander together.

I remained standing in the anteroom, ready for a good "whistle". After a few moments, Helmut entered. Like me, he was in civilian clothes. He was accompanied by a lieutenant in uniform. He must have been a reservist

because he was much older than the rest of us, well into his mid-thirties. I introduced myself.

"Starck," said the lieutenant.

The commander's voice boomed behind me.

"P., come in! Have you slept in now?"

I would have loved to crawl under the table, I was so embarrassed. Everyone laughed.

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant Colonel. It rarely happens to me that I oversleep."

"Oh nonsense, don't do that. When the UvD woke you up, you were sleeping like the dead. I therefore ordered you to go back to sleep. Rest assured, you would have been here at 7.30 a.m. if I had needed you. Tell the other gentlemen to come in too." Lieutenant Starck and Helmut entered.

"Gentlemen, get ready to leave immediately. You will be at the flight control center at 9.45 am. A W 34 will take off from there at 10.00 a.m. to take you to the transfer point for your aircraft. You will find out more details there shortly before take-off, which is expected to be in the afternoon. That's all I know. Are there any more questions?"

We paid our respects and wanted to leave. At the door, the lieutenant colonel held me back and gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Do a good job, P. Just don't hang your head. When you meet Dr. Barth, say hello to him for me."

The doctor's mysterious wires also reached this far. Who was he really? Nobody knew him, and yet he knew everyone. Strange.

Five minutes before time, a small bus pulled up in front of the accommodation. While I was loading my luggage, the others arrived. Everyone was now wearing "robber's civilian clothes". I sat down next to Helmut. We remained silent. I had gotten out of the habit of asking questions.

The pilot of the W 34, a non-commissioned officer, was waiting impatiently for us. We climbed into the "corrugated iron cart" and off we went. After just under a quarter of an hour, we were curving over a huge lake district. We were north of Berlin, but where? Then it finally dawned on me. We had flown over this area during the orientation flight. Lake Müritz lay below us. The airfield was a hive of activity. A wild jumble of airplanes of all different types. Security guards took us to a secluded hangar on the south-western edge of the airfield. The hangar doors were still closed. We were allocated a small room in one of the side annexes as a recreation room, where we put our things down. After a few minutes, a civilian in blue overalls came

and asked who the pilots were. Together with Heinrich and Helmut W. he then went over to the hangar. Starck and I had to wait for ages. They only came back around noon.

"The technical briefing for you won't be until after lunch. We'll go over to the engineering fair and then we'll see what happens!" Heinrich turned to Starck and me.

The lunch was excellent, of almost peacetime quality. On our return we were called up.

"Picture observer, please come with me."

We entered the hall through a steel door. Mechanics were working on two huge birds. I recognized them immediately: they were the special version of the Ju 86 from Budapest, only they had four-wing propellers. The machine guns were missing. The aircraft was without armament, the fuselage nose was shortened and better glazed. The more powerful Jumo 207 diesel engines were also equipped with a turbocharger and additional radiators on the wings, known as forced-air coolers.

While I was still absorbed in the sight of the plane, trying to memorize every detail, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I was speechless. Behind me stood Willi Rudolph, another fellow aerial photographer. It was simply unbelievable.

"Willi, what are you doing here? Is the air force really that small?"

He tapped his lips with his finger, the sign for silence.

"It's all unimportant. I almost threw my arms around your neck when you stepped into the hall. I'm really looking forward to seeing you again. Come on now, there's no time to 'ratchet'. I have to show you the equipment."

We climbed down a small ladder into the fuselage of the huge bird. It was a damn tight affair. There was only a narrow passage between two additional fuselage containers. Where the bomb bay was normally installed, there was now the convergent imaging device consisting of four RB 20/30 series imaging devices, covered with protective cladding against the cold at high altitudes. The device was also heated with warm air. Directly in front of it was the RB 100/30, also with protective cladding and hot-air heating, which ensured trouble-free operation even at minus 50°. An RB 50/30 was mounted next to it at the entrance. The three overlap controls were clearly arranged in front of my seat. I had to kneel down to operate them, which didn't seem very practical to me. However, no other solution was technically possible. Willi pulled a canvas bag out of a side compartment with documents for the image flight planning: calculation tables for the number of images, image scale,

base, strip distance, image sequence time with longitudinal coverage of 30 % and 60 % for all three devices. Overview of settings for the coverage controls. Film sensitivities and filters.

"For normal jobs, there's nothing to do with the devices. You are both in the pressure chamber. However, if a cassette change becomes necessary or is foreseeable before the flight, you must either start lowering the internal pressure in good time or fly with the pressure chamber valve open at all. Everything has its advantages and disadvantages. The camera heater has only just been installed. We had a lot of malfunctions before. I wish you all the best. I hope it won't be another few years before we see each other again!" he said, and he was gone.

Another mechanic explained the pressure chamber, the breathing apparatus, valves and their monitoring instruments. A third explained the handling and position of the radios. Now I realized that we had a big-picture mission to fly; but where to?

It was about 3 p.m. when Lieutenant Heinrich entered the room in a great hurry.

"Get ready for take-off, load your hand luggage. It's time in 20 minutes. Bring everything to the flight preparation room."

When we were gathered there, Heinrich ordered me to close the door. He pulled a sealed envelope out of a card pocket and broke the seal.

"Our first destination is Budapest. Witte, get the route weather immediately. You, P., get the necessary maps. In the meantime, I'll register the start."

As he spoke, the roar of the heavy hall doors could be heard from the hall. The machines were now being readied for take-off.

In the next room I took the necessary flight charts from the chart cabinet, then I helped Heinrich with the course calculation. Helmut was also in full action with his observer.

"Witte, you start five minutes after us, that's for sure."

"Sure, Mr. Lieutenant. We'll meet in Budapest then."

We put on our suits, completely neutral summer suits without any insignia, and went over to the hall. The attendants took care of our hand luggage and put the parachutes on the seats.

Maneuvering carefully, a tractor pulled the first machine out of the hall. Brake blocks were placed in front of it. A starter unit was pushed under the surface. A quick handshake with Helmut, a farewell call to his observer, then

I followed Heinrich to our plane.

Behind the first lieutenant I climbed up the narrow entrance - God help us if we had to get out -, pulled up the small ladder and closed the entrance. There were problems with the bulkhead door to the pressure chamber; only after several attempts was I able to turn the locking lever. First I put on the parachute straps, then I fastened my harness. FT canopy tightened, cables connected and I was ready. I reached back to the radio switch and after a few seconds I could hear the hissing of "self-understanding". I watched Heinrich carefully as he worked. He conscientiously checked instrument after instrument.

"Ready, Mr. Lieutenant."

He raised his left hand. The starter began its piercing whistle. Roaring like a predator, the left-hand engine started up after a few seconds. The huge four-bladed propeller began to turn. The right-hand engine followed almost immediately. It was a reassuring feeling when everything worked right away.

The metallic roar of the beefy diesel engines sounded like safety and impetuous power. I thought I was sitting between two huge diesel locomotives. Tank drivers or submariners might be gripped by a similar feeling at such a moment.

After a few minutes, Heinrich began to "slow down" the engines. The whine of the turbochargers resounded. The plane shook and threatened to skip the brake pads. The wide-span wings trembled. Another small wave and the brake pads flew away. The landing gear groaned softly, the large wheels crunched over the concrete. We taxied to the start. The usual radio communication with the direction finder, then we were on the runway.

Heinrich slowly pushed the throttle forward. Only half-fuelled, the plane took off after just a few hundred meters. I took off my seatbelt and made myself as comfortable as possible.

"Course 160°!" Heinrich reported.

After a few minutes, I checked the course calculation with the Knemeyer. It was correct.

I tried to catch a glimpse of Berlin through the side window. In vain, the glare of the sun in the west turned the glaring light of the haze into an impenetrable curtain.

Over the next half hour, I familiarized myself thoroughly with the aircraft's instrumentation. Heinrich let me take the controls for a while. No problem. In contrast to the sensitive Do17Z, which I had also tried, the Ju86 was like the famous "board" in the air. It took a strong deflection of the rudder to bring it

out of its "calm". Heinrich explained to me that this had not been so noticeable in the normal version, only the extension of the wings had given the aircraft this extreme lateral stability. I tried a "cloud landing". Even that didn't cause any problems. In an emergency I would probably have brought the bird to the ground all by myself, at least it would have been enough for a smooth "belly landing".

Dusk cast its gray-blue shadows over the Puszta as we glided into Budapest. The lights of the airfield lighting lined up next to the runway like two endless strings of pearls. Towards the west, the last light of the day rose like a golden crown above the horizon.

We touched down softly, as if on a rubber mat, accompanied only by the muffled rolling of the landing gear. At the end of the runway, we turned around and headed for one of the hangars, in front of which we could see the circling light of a waiting man. A short roar of the engines, half a turn and we were standing on our parking spot.

Heinrich left the machine and asked me to wait a moment. After a few minutes, his head appeared in the hatch:

"You can get out. Apart from your personal belongings, everything can stay in the machine. It will be guarded."

As soon as I had closed the access hatch from the outside, Helmut hovered in with his plane. I waited until he had also reached his stand, then we walked together over to the small building that I had already seen on the flight over. The sergeant on duty didn't even look at us when we entered. In the next room, I heard Heinrich's voice discussing the technical maintenance of our aircraft. Perhaps five minutes had passed when a car pulled up outside. The young captain I had already met appeared in the doorway.

"Good evening, gentlemen, who is the commander?"

I directed him to the next room. In passing, he remarked:

"Nice to see you again so soon."

So he had also recognized me immediately. From the warmth of the greeting between the two officers, it was easy to deduce that they had known each other for a long time. After a while they both came out to us:

"Gentlemen, welcome to Budapest. You can still have dinner, everything is ready. You will then be shown to your accommodation. You are not allowed to leave the airbase. Please exercise restraint when talking to the crews stationed here. They know the confidentiality regulations imposed on us. May I take my leave and wish you a good evening!"

As quickly as it had arrived, it had disappeared again.

After dinner, we took a walk through the airbase together to stretch our legs a little. Although Lieutenant Starck was a very taciturn gentleman, the conversation quickly turned to the Hungarian capital and the current situation in Hungary. It always surprised me how little most Germans were familiar with the problems of this country, even though it was literally on our doorstep. The average German citizen's image of Hungary was characterized by an almost operetta-like romanticism.

When I gently pointed out that the Hungarian brotherhood in arms was by no means as far off as it was portrayed in the press and on the radio, Heinrich and Witte looked at me in amazement, only Starck nodded his head in agreement. Helmut W. said that I would have to explain this in more detail. In order not to break any porcelain, I approached the subject with great caution.

I described Hungary's relationship with its neighbors, the problems raised by the collapse of Czechoslovakia, the relationship with Romania and the effects of the Vienna Arbitration Award, the situation of the army and the position of the "Arrow Crossers". I also pointed out that they had hardly any support in the troops and were even rejected in wide circles of the officer corps. Starck nodded approvingly again, while Heinrich became a single question mark.

"Man, how do you know all that?" he asked.

"I knew many Hungarian students in Vienna, with whom I often spent nights in discussion, so you hear and learn a lot. Hungarian history is full of drama."

Lieutenant Starck intervened:

"I didn't want to interrupt Mr. P.. He explained the situation perfectly. I worked here in Hungary for three years before the war."

"Then I must remain silent, Mr. Lieutenant!"

"But nonsense, on the contrary! I'm always interested to hear other people's opinions. I was just surprised because you're still very young."

Lieutenant Starck's participation added color to the conversation. There was still a lot I could learn. As we stood in the anteroom of our accommodation, Heinrich looked at me thoughtfully:

"We'll have to talk often when we have time. You've actually come to the wrong place. But now let's get into the trap."

We said goodbye to Lieutenant Starck and Helmut. In the course of the conversation it turned out that Mr. Starck was an aerial photography expert from Hansa-Luftbild GmbH, who had been put into an officer's uniform without further ado.

It was around 4.00 a.m. when footsteps in the hallway woke me up. Someone opened the door and turned on the light. It was the captain. We got up and rubbed the sleep out of our eyes.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Mr. Heinrich, an important radio message for you."

The first lieutenant signed the notebook and thanked me. He carefully opened the envelope with a penknife, read the words and handed it to me.

"Violet blossom, 4.45 am. What does that mean?"

"That means we have no more time. We have to get ready for take-off as quickly as possible."

He pulled his map case out from under his pillow and handed me an envelope.

"Take him to Witte."

I didn't need to wake my comrades, they were already awake.

"That's for you. Break a leg!"

As soon as we had finished, an orderly called us to breakfast. The strong coffee drove the last sleep from our limbs. The whole eyrie was still in a deep sleep. Only our "mill" and a Do 215 had "fireflies" dancing around them. The control room was at work.

In the operations room at 4.45 sharp, Heinrich opened another envelope with the password "Veilchenblüte" written on it. He took a quick look at the contents and handed it over to me. "Destination: Otopeni-Bucharest. "

My heart leapt for joy, in a few hours I was back with Jutta.

I got new maps from the flight officer and made a note of the most important information about the weather en route: wind from 285°, 20 km/h, dusty clouds in Transylvania. Cumuli up to 3500m. In Wallachia low cumulus clouds. Wind from 320°. That was enough. Heinrich had registered the flight in the meantime.

We slipped into the combinations and picked up our hand luggage.

As we left the operations room, the first engine on our machine was already roaring away. Flames flickered out of the exhaust pipes and emitted a long shower of sparks. As usual, I climbed into the machine behind Heinrich and took care of my things. When the foreman had left the machine, I locked the entrance. Again I had difficulties with the locking mechanism. I reported this to Heinrich because it could have bad consequences.

"We'll have it checked in Bucharest," he said laconically, "if it can't be fixed, we'll fly without pressure equalization." He let the engines warm up

and braked. Temperature, oil pressure, engine speed, everything was fine.

"Ready to go?"

"Done!"

In the dim light of the on-board lighting, I prepared my navigation documents and fastened my seatbelt. We taxied to take off. I could only make out the shadowy outline of Heinrich. Gaining speed, the plane taxied over the runway. It was still night. Only far to the east did a bright streak herald the approaching day.

The lights from the runway lighting flashed past, casting a wild display of lights inside the cockpit. We took off. I watched Heinrich work for a while, retracted the landing gear, then I shut myself away in my "little chamber". It would be two hours before we had Bucharest soil under our feet again. We waited for the things to come.

We must have been flying for around thirty minutes when we rose from the gray of dawn into the first rays of the sun. To the south the veils of mist over the Danube lowlands, to the east the towers of cloud over Transylvania, in front of us the glitter of the eternal diamond. A fantastically beautiful picture. The plane was unusually quiet, only the metallic roar of the heavy engines made the wide-span wing tremble. Altitude 3000 meters. We were approaching the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps. Below us lay the Banat, settlement area of industrious Swabians for more than two hundred years.

This Ju86R was certainly an excellent aircraft, but in the end it was only a stopgap solution, a makeshift solution instead of a really long-range, fast and high-flying long-range reconnaissance aircraft, which the Luftwaffe so urgently needed at that time. It was a remarkable achievement in aircraft engine construction what the designers got out of these diesel engines and gave this aircraft a service ceiling of almost 14,000 meters. But on closer inspection, we were lagging behind the requirements here too.

The Ju86P and R could no longer be used over England, because an improved version of the Spitfire was able to catch them at this altitude. The Luftwaffe was not equipped for long-range strategic air warfare, which was bound to have disastrous consequences sooner or later.

I remember a planning exercise in the staff of the Austrian Air Force Command in the winter of 1938/39. I had secondary tasks: Drawing on the situation map and preparing the aerial photographs. Work that gave me a lot

of time to watch and listen. I was always surprised by the critical nature and expertise of officers who had come out of the former Austrian air force. Although the air force of the Austrian Armed Forces was hardly a significant factor in material terms, in terms of the quality of its personnel it could have represented a significant cadre in the development and equipping of the air force if these men had been deployed correctly. The high level of their general education in particular never ceased to amaze me. Our gentlemen from the "old Reich" - as they used to say in those days - were usually unable to match the in-depth knowledge of my superiors from the Austrian Air Force. Here, too, exceptions proved the rule. They were very often equipped with an almost uncanny intuition for future developments and showed a degree of "civil courage" that was downright frightening. Here, I think, a remnant of the universality of the old k. u. k. Monarchy.

Towards the end of the planning exercise, there was a sharp debate about the future image of war propagated by General Jeschonnek at the time.

An older major from the Austrian air force literally tore the German air force concept to shreds. He did so with a calm matter-of-factness that commanded respect.

He based his criticism on the use of dive bombers. His remarks remained in my memory so clearly and seemed to me so well-founded and logical that they influenced all my future thinking on problems of air warfare.

He stated the following:

He was convinced that it was a dangerous fallacy to assume that in a future war the conflicts would be limited to certain European states or the immediate neighbors of the Reich.

British, French and Russian studies - excerpts of which he read out - basically assumed a general European war. The Luftwaffe command therefore had to include this possibility as the most likely in the war picture.

The dive bomber, he said, was a tactical weapon and not of strategic and decisive war significance. Moreover, the existing types, HS 123 and the newer Ju87, were not technically designed in such a way that they could also be used for other purposes. The construction of dive bombers was complex and expensive. In the event of war, this would place a serious burden on production and supply. The target of the dive bomber is the point target: a bridge, a ship, a bunker, a railroad station, a battery position, nothing more. The range is very limited, the deployment restricted to the battlefield and the tactical area.

Naturally, the army command was impressed by such an aircraft, as it

considerably extended the "range of the artillery". For operational air warfare, the aircraft was a "better toy". (This remark caused a great deal of unrest, which General Loehr was only able to put an end to through his personal intervention).

If we have to assume that the possible opponents of the war have an expansion of the war in mind, we must reckon with opponents such as Great Britain, France, the USSR and perhaps even the USA. This would inevitably force the Reich to engage in long-range, strategic air warfare, whether or not it wanted to at the moment was "beside the point".

The conclusion from this:

The air force needs long-range large bombers capable of effectively engaging any target from Spitsbergen to Tripoli, from Iceland to Moscow. Long-range, fast, long-range fighters would have to be available for such a concept. Such aircraft types could also be used for other tasks, such as reconnaissance. This would save on costly special constructions.

In the event of war, the expected high losses of tactical aircraft would be more expensive for the Luftwaffe than the expansion of a strategic bomber fleet.

Based on the course of the simulation so far, he had the impression that the Reichsdeutsche Herren were obsessed with the idea that a future war could be won with dive bombers and fighters alone.

The concluding discussion once again allowed the different opinions to clash.

What made me so thoughtful was that the Austrian aviation major's ideas were so impressively confirmed by the course of the war so far. The air war over England was practically decided. The losses of our units were so great that it had become inevitable that the operations would have to be called off.

The sun poured the fullness of its light onto the fertile fields and hills of Wallachia as we slowly floated into Otopeni. Within a few days, the deep, lush green of the cornfields outweighed the colorful spectrum of the farmland. The Dumbovita foamed and bubbled towards the capital, as if it couldn't wait to join the hustle and bustle.

We were directed to a somewhat secluded hangar. Two guards with submachine guns stood next to the plane. The stupidest person would have noticed that. While we were taking off our flying gear in an adjoining room, a detector came and rattled his heels:

"Mr. P. to the meeting room immediately. You are expected there."

"Where is this room?"

"In the small building behind the hall. I'll take you there."

I turned to Lieutenant Heinrich:

"What do you want me to do, Lieutenant?"

"I was already expecting that. I've been prepared in Berlin for the fact that you'll be needed elsewhere. Well, then, get on your feet. Let's see what's going on."

I carefully packed my things. I handed the flight documents to Lieutenant Heinrich. When I looked a bit perplexed, a sergeant came forward:

"Just leave the things where they are. We'll take care of it as soon as we know where you'll be staying. Go on, the gentlemen are impatient."

Mr. Sommer was standing in the meeting room with a younger gentleman I didn't know.

"How did you know I was coming here today?" I asked him in surprise.

"Man of God, you'll never learn, get used to asking questions. Come on now, don't feign tiredness. I have to take you to a police station immediately."

He only continued the conversation in the car.

"How are things in Berlin? Everything okay?"

"Yes, what can I say. They act as if there's no war at all, they live out the day as if they were at peace," I replied.

"Is it perhaps different here on the Bucharest 'bacon front'? Look at our 'victorious Wehrmacht' here! It can make you sick."

We didn't go where I had expected, but to the air force mission. We were met by a major. He greeted us in a very friendly manner. He seemed to know Sommer.

"That went faster than expected. The appointment for the meeting has been postponed. Mr. P., you can go to your accommodation, you'll be back here at 1.30 pm. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Major. Can I visit relatives in the meantime?"

He looked at me in surprise.

"You have relatives here?"

"Yes, my bride!"

"Of course you can. Do your relatives have a phone? Please give Mr. Sommer and me the number in case you have to be here earlier!"

Sommer patted me on the shoulder with a laugh.

"Now let's go, young groom."

I called my bride at her office from a phone booth, then her parents. I took a

cab to my quarters and changed quickly. You couldn't be seen anywhere in the "robber's uniform". My hostess was visibly disappointed that I had hardly arrived when I had to leave again.

Only those who have learned to use the seconds and minutes of their lives can appreciate the months and years. What a full life can be contained in a single minute, how much uselessly wasted time in a whole year.

After lunch, we strolled down Boulevard Bratianu, laughing and joking and forgetting about the world around us.

We drove from the air force mission to the German legation, where one of the gentlemen from the diplomatic mission was supposed to join us.

In the corridor I met Mr. Ranger from the consular department again, one of those men from our diplomatic mission who could be said to have an impeccable reputation. An absolutely correct official, with an unusually winning manner and a great willingness to help, the very model of a consular official. A stark contrast to his colleague v. Blücher.

A few weeks ago, we had spent a wine-filled evening together, during which he tried to familiarize me with the domestic political situation in Romania and Hungary. He did this with a mastery that only a true connoisseur of the countries could possess. This acquaintance developed into a bond that lasted for decades and outlasted the war.

After the expected gentleman had arrived, we went back out onto the national highway to Ploesti.

As soon as we had taken our seats in the camp room, the Romanian officers began their talk, including Colonel Krescu. The developments in the Romanian-Russian border area had become increasingly serious. One could sense the anxiety that had gripped everyone. Almost every word they said showed their concern about future developments. Shortly before the situation report ended, we heard shouts of command and reports in the corridor. A Romanian guard major entered the situation room and shouted in Romanian:

"Gentlemen, the marshal. Please stand up."

Then I saw the Romanian head of state up close for the first time. Although I was sitting in the back row, I was able to get a good look at him: a medium-sized, slim and unusually wiry Romanian officer for his age: Marshal Ion Antonescu. His eyes had an unusual clarity and immediately captured everyone. Only Adolf Hitler had ever had such impressive eyes. His gaze wandered calmly over those present, then he asked them to take their seats. Colonel Krescu, as the person in charge, reported and once again presented

the essential details of the briefing.

I could understand that the Führer also had great respect for this man. He asked his questions with enormous accuracy. The only one who seemed to be a match for him was Colonel Krescu. Remarkably, he didn't give him a glance, even though he was constantly bombarding him with questions. Calmly, with a slight smile on his lips, the colonel answered every one of the marshal's questions and recounted the developments of the last few days. You could sense that there was a great deal of tension between these two men. I thought of the words of Dr. Barth.

The marshal rose abruptly and went to the situation map. His eyes wandered incessantly over the tactical signs, then he turned slowly and looked thoughtfully at the colonel. He carefully put on his large plate cap and picked up his marshal's baton.

"This has made war with the Soviet Union inevitable. But this time we are not alone. May God protect our country."

He raised his baton in salute and left the room. We looked at each other in shock. An icy silence had fallen over the audience.

The gentlemen dropped me off near my quarters.

"You have to be available at all times in case you're needed today. Got it!" Sommer called after me.

"I understand."

Thoughtfully, I walked over to Dumbrava Rosie.

At dawn the next day, an official car took me out to Otopeni. I met the first lieutenant in the meeting room. He greeted me with a smile:

"Good morning. Where have you been wandering around? You disappeared off the face of the earth. Wherever I called, you were just gone. I really needed a guide to Bucharest's nightlife."

"If that's what you want, we can do it at any time."

"And if that's what you want," he exclaimed, "while I'm here, I want to see something of this city."

He took me under his arm and dragged me over to the water frogs.

"There's nothing going on at all. Miserable weather all over the Balkans. Still, I wasn't entirely comfortable with the thought that nobody knew where you were."

"Won't happen again, Lieutenant. It's always difficult to serve two gentlemen. You have a number here. If it happens again, they'll always know where I am."

One of the weather officers explained the situation:

"There is a pronounced low over the eastern Mediterranean. The warm, humid air flowing into the Wallachian basin and the Black Sea region will lead to heavy rain showers on the eastern and southern edges of the Carpathians. Across the Balkans, partly stormy winds from the SSE with low cloud cover. The weather is only expected to improve in two to three days when the high over the Caucasus spreads westwards." No weather for an aerial photography assignment, that was clear. So we had a day off ahead of us.

From the flight preparation room, Heinrich had another coded conversation, then he turned to me:

"We still have today and tomorrow to rest. Let's go into town!" It turned out to be two wild days.

The following evening, I was getting ready to go out when the doorbell rang. The driver came up the stairs.

"Good evening, you should get ready immediately and come with me."

That meant a flight mission. Down with the good clothes and into the "robber's clothes". A quick call to Jutta:

"It's not going to work tonight. I'm on duty. Take care."

I heard her disappointment.

"There's nothing you can do. Take care of yourself. Goodbye!"

We took the highway out to Otopeni. Rain showers lashed against the windows. Wisps of mist billowed through the trees. It wasn't exactly flying weather.

Heinrich greeted me:

"That worked out really well. Go over to the hall immediately. Check the imaging equipment."

In the poorly lit hall, I was greeted by a non-commissioned officer and picture equipment supervisor. We carefully checked all the equipment and instruments together: the locking of the cassettes, the cassette sliders, the removal of the lens covers, the movement of the image shaft sliders, overlap regulators, parachutes, spare cassettes, filters. Everything was in order.

The outward calm could not hide the fact that a nervous tension had settled over us. Heinrich began his usual rounds around the table.

About an hour later, he was called to the telex office. I myself sought distraction by reading "Hengst Maestoso Austria", put on my fur jacket and tucked myself into a corner. Sleep was out of the question. What would the

next few hours bring?

It was approaching midnight when Heinrich finally returned. The rain had subsided.

"We can lie down, there's nothing going on today."

The following morning was also pretty monotonous, the afternoon passed and it was evening again. The idle time was getting on our nerves.

Despite the copious amounts of "Valea Lunga" we enjoyed, we were unable to strike up a conversation. When we got back to our cabin, we went straight to bed. Heinrich immediately fell into a deep sleep. I listened to the calm regularity of his breathing and envied him for it. Lost in thought, I dozed off. The noise of planes taking off droned over the airfield again and again.

The soft creaking of the door made me sit up and take notice. A sergeant looked around the room and woke Heinrich. They spoke quietly to each other.

"I have to get over to Pipera quickly, there's news there. If you receive a radio message or a telex, please acknowledge. Here are the key documents."

He quietly withdrew. I thought about it. Pipera? What could be there? There were some planes from the ObdL reconnaissance group, dark gray Do 215s. I had noticed them months earlier when my unit was still there.

The noise of planes taking off rang out again, like the distant thunder of a storm across the tarmac. I pressed my forehead against the glass and tried to make out the outlines of the planes taking off in the uniform darkness. In vain, only the flickering of the exhaust flames gave a hint of their path.

My thoughts drifted to the distant rolling of the engines. They wandered up to infinite distances. Not a day went by without me thinking about the meaning of life, about this uprising of the masses. Thousands, even millions, walked across the battlefields. Some were caught up in frenzied fear. Others with the stoic calm of fatalists. Only a few with the dignity of the knowledgeable.

The door opened a crack and the cone of light from a flashlight slid searchingly towards my bed. Blinded, I raised my arm in front of my eyes. Had I been asleep? Leaning against the wall of the barracks, I sat on my bed with my legs tucked under me. I glanced at the window; it was still dark outside. The light switch clicked. Fleinrich was standing in the middle of the room.

"Get dressed. We're going to the flight preparation room."

I hurriedly gathered my things together. A glance at the clock: 4.10. So I

had slept for a few hours after all, albeit not very comfortably. Shivering, I set off.

"The flight order has arrived," Fleinrich turned to me and gave me the decoded radio message.

"Spring breeze, from 4.00 a.m."

He threw his card case on the table and took out the envelope with the indicated keyword. He carefully broke the seal, took out a sheet of paper and read it with rapt attention, then handed it to me:

"Secret commando matter

*Image flight order:*

- Series picture of both banks of the Dnieper from the mouth at Kherson to Dnieper-Propetrovsk.
- Airfields around Kherson.
- Shore area on both sides Sadovoje-Nikolskoje, Berislaw-Kachowka, Nikopol-Kanuka.
- Bridges and Zaporozhye power station.
- Airfields in the Zaporozhye region.
- Airfields, bridges and railroads in the Dnipropetrovsk region.
- Railroad Dnipropetrovsk-Piatikhatni-Alexandria-Snamenka-Kirovograd.
- Airfields in the Kirovograd-Novo Ukrainka-Beresovka-Pervomaisk-Odessa area.

This order must be destroyed immediately upon receipt and evaluation."

Now we had the "salad". Although I had expected such an order, the certainty of the order looked somewhat different. I looked over at Heinrich questioningly. He was leaning over the map table.

"The maps are not enough. They only cover the area between the Pruth and the Dniester. We need the connecting sheets to the east. Here you have the key to the map room, there's a tin case there, bring it here."

"Will do, Herr Oberleutnant."

There were several sets of new cards in the suitcase. I picked out the connecting sheets and gave them to Heinrich.

"Damn, that's not much," he grumbled to himself.

In fact, the map image is poor in warmth. The white areas predominated by far. Only a few roads and railroad lines were marked. The legend was imprecise. Only along the Black Sea coast were the entries more accurate. Together, we transferred the specified destinations to the map, underlined the

places mentioned, outlined the area of the probable area, then Heinrich took a match, burned the order together with the envelope over a tin bucket and ground the ashes.

I prepared two sets of cards, folded them in the order of the flight order and gave one of them to Heinrich. I used a template to draw in the required picture strips.

"Lieutenant, how high is the flight altitude above the commanded operational area?"

"About 12,500 meters."

I began to do the math:

Image scale Rb 100/30      = 1:12 500

Image scale Rb 50/30      = 1: 25 000

Image scale Rb 20/30      - 1 : 62 500

I estimated the base length at 60 % coverage and the approximate frame rate at a speed of approx. 380 km/h above ground. I then read off the flight distance per 10 m of film and the number of shots required from the tables. I realized immediately that there were problems here.

"Herr Oberleutnant, as the order says, I have to change the cassettes in the Rb 100/30 at least once, probably twice. With the Rb 50/30, the film can last. I can leave the converging device running all the time, so there's certainly no need to change it."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, Herr Oberleutnant."

"Then there's no point in flying with a pressure chamber. Maybe you can save some film after all?"

"I've calculated it exactly. With 30 percent coverage it would just about be enough, but then the geodesists can't work with the stereo planigraph and the image people can't work with the rectification device, we also need 60 percent coverage for the spatial image evaluation and the film is not sufficient for this if the job is carried out carefully."

The "weatherman" on duty jumped up from his cot yawning as we entered.

"What on earth do you want at the crack of dawn," he rumbled.

We did not respond to his questions any further.

"We need the big picture."

"Where are you going in this weather?"

"Not so curious. Where are the latest weather reports?"

"The early reports aren't in yet, I can only come up with the late evening reports."

The official handed me a bundle of telexes.

We checked message by message.

"That looks good. If it continues like this, we'll have ideal weather conditions during the morning. Don't you think so?" Heinrich turned to me.

The clouds cleared over southern Bessarabia and the mouth of the Danube. A Romanian weather observer on a ship approx. 60 km east of the mouth of the Danube reported a clear night at 1.00 am. The wind shifted from SSE to east. If the weather conditions continued to improve, we could be more than satisfied.

The teleprinter began to clatter. The official sat down at the machine and we looked over his shoulder. After a myriad of other messages came the one we were interested in: Constanta-Sulina rising air pressure. Cessation of precipitation. Extension of the high over Ukraine to the southeast. That was enough. We said our goodbyes.

"When do we have the best reception conditions?"

"Between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., Herr Oberleutnant. After so many days of rain, we must expect haze and fog over the lowlands. The haze and fog will only lift around midday. At this time of year, the sun is still quite low, so there is sufficient shadow formation to make the evaluators' work easier."

"Agreed. We'll take off at around 8.15 am. We need to allow about 2 hours and 45 minutes for the approach and climb. This means that we can start the photo flight at around 11.00 am. How do you feel? Will you last three hours at 12,000 m?"

"I think so. There were no difficulties during the practice flights."

"Well, if you really need to dismantle, we can close the pressure valves. I've already done about thirty such high-altitude flights myself, so you get used to it. To reassure you, I've never had any contact with the Soviets. The control center assured me last night that all flights are running smoothly."

Nevertheless, I wasn't comfortable with the whole thing. Well, Heinrich had literally "crammed" the rules of conduct with me, but in practice everything always looked completely different.

Sleep was no longer an option. My thoughts kept circling around the subject of the emergency landing. I rehearsed every move in my mind. Images of murdered bomber crews from the French campaign appeared before my eyes: smashed skulls, mutilated faces, gouged out eyes, broken arms and legs,

dozens of knife stabs in their bodies - that's how they were taken out of holes that had been quickly dug up. Not exactly a pleasant death. Should it be any different for the Red Army soldiers? Hardly! They would squeeze us like fresh lemons. German soldiers who fell into the hands of the Soviets as Soviet troops advanced towards the agreed demarcation line in Poland could tell you a thing or two about it. Even though many were released again after fierce intervention, the shock was still in everyone's bones. There were certain indications that several hundred of the Germans who were considered missing at the time made their way into captivity together with Polish soldiers.

The mood of the population had not yet been whipped up by tirades of hatred, but the news from Bessarabia did not bode well. But what the hell! We couldn't even invoke the Geneva Convention. We were still German civilians with Turkish passports, who had gone missing. Who would believe that?

Thoughtfully, we went back to our accommodation and got dressed and lay down on our beds. As the saying goes: "A soldier waits half his life in vain!"

At 7.00 a.m. it was still pouring with rain. I got up to wake Heinrich. He was lying with his eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling.

"I thought you were still asleep. We have to get ready."

We quickly took a shower to finally drive the sleep from our limbs.

"Dress carefully, poorly fitting clothing can be extremely uncomfortable at high altitudes," said Heinrich.

I conscientiously followed his advice. When I had finished, he stood up in front of me:

"Go on, empty all your pockets. You mustn't carry anything with you that could give away our identity. Purse, wallet, everything stays here. The smallest coin can have bad consequences."

He searched me like an experienced detective. Even my shoes had to come off again. Only then was he satisfied.

"Everything all right, Lieutenant?"

"Sure, I didn't expect anything else. We're going to have breakfast now. But don't eat too much, especially bread. Flatulence can cause you discomfort. We'll bring strong coffee in thermos flasks."

I didn't have much of an appetite either, I was far too excited.

"Can I use the phone again?"

"Don't do that, otherwise we'll get into trouble. You'll be fine for a few more hours."

Basically, he was right, so he kept his mouth shut.

We left the superfluous documents and items as well as our personal belongings with the German commander of the airbase. In the flight preparation room we calmly discussed the details of the flight again, then I went over to the "weathermen" to get an overview of the latest reports.

Again, the officer couldn't hold back his curiosity. He would have loved to know which unit we belonged to and what our mission was. But when all the questions were to no avail, he began to explain the general weather situation in such an exemplary manner that I could not help but show him my respect.

"A lesson learned is a lesson learned," he said laconically.

The weather had improved noticeably. The navy and the weather observatories on the Black Sea coast reported cloudless skies and a moderate wind from 80°. So we were ready to go.

The hall doors were wide open. It was a hive of activity. Mechanics and maintenance staff were carrying out final checks. Two tanker trucks pumped their contents into the wings and fuselage of the aircraft. A guard with submachine guns constantly circled the bird to ensure that no unauthorized person could tamper with it. This secrecy was annoying. The "war paint" alone was bound to cause a stir, and then there were these exaggerated security measures. They certainly did more harm than good. The attention that some Romanian aviation officers paid to the goings-on only confirmed that I was right.

A sergeant in a black fatigues came over to me and asked for the pilot. I referred him to Heinrich.

"I'm reporting the machine ready for take-off!"

"Good, let the engines warm up. After 'slowing down', refuel again."

A tug pulled the machine out. First Lieutenant Heinrich and the foreman climbed into the fuselage. The starters began to whistle. After a few minutes, both engines were running. The rudders moved and the usual preparations for take-off were made. The "braking" followed. The heavy engines roared and spewed long flames from the exhaust pipes for a moment, then there was silence again. One of the tankers rolled up, the pumps whirled briefly and the missing liters were pumped in.

The foreman came out and waved to me. A quick handshake as he passed, then I climbed into the hull. Ladder up, access hatch locked, bulkhead door closed, done!

While Heinrich checked all the instruments again, I took care of my documents, prepared my parachute and harness, checked the canopy

regulators, the oxygen pressure and the radio - everything was in order. As soon as I had connected the FT canopy, I heard Heinrich's raspy voice:

"Are you finished?"

"Ready, Mr. Lieutenant."

I put on the parachute straps and fastened my seatbelt. Slowly he pushed the throttles forward, the speed of the two huge propellers increased and we taxied leisurely past the parked Romanian and German fighter planes to the take-off at the western end of the airfield.

The usual radio communication with the direction finder, then it was quiet again. Absolute radio silence was ordered during the flight. We had to rely exclusively on the results of the direction finding, we could only keep in touch with each other via "self-understanding". The officer on take-off duty raised his flag.

The powerful engines began to roar, the plane began to roll sluggishly, only hesitantly picking up speed. The immense weight of the full fuel tanks made itself felt. We had already reached the center of the field, but the tail wheel still hadn't lifted off, even though Heinrich had pushed the control column all the way forward. We were barely 300 meters from the edge of the airfield when we came up, perhaps 3 or 4 meters separating us from the tops of the trees between the barracks of the intelligence troops. Heinrich waved me over. I retracted the landing gear. Now we were gaining altitude more quickly.

We left Baneasa to our right and flew over the poor suburban settlements of Bucharest. People stared up in surprise at the thundering monster flying so close over their heads, you could almost recognize every single face.

The horizontal visibility was lousy, barely 1000 m. Rain lashed against the windows of the cockpit. At an altitude of around 400 m, we reached the cloud base. Thick clouds of fog swept past us and then we were in the middle of a real "washtub". I watched the altimeter, the needle moved slowly: 500 m, 600 m, 700 m, 800 m. It must have been about 8 to 10 minutes before the wall of fog around us began to glow. Millions of water droplets glistened, then we were through. A picture of unimaginable beauty. Like the eternal ice of huge glaciers, we were surrounded by the dazzling white of the clouds.

I pulled down my goggles and we ran straight into the glare of the sun. After a few minutes, the clouds broke up and dispersed into huge clumps, occasionally revealing a view of the fields of the Baragan steppe, land of rare fertility, the granary of Romania. Between the regular contours of the fields, the glistening meanders of small streams and rivers, here and there the small

houses of Romanian villages but also the representative houses of Romanian landowners. We "clung" to the Bucharest-Cernavoda railroad line, which, as if drawn with a ruler, took its dead-straight route to the east, an ideal navigational aid.

To our left, the Jalomita meandered through the flat hills. There was hardly any traffic on the roads below, just the odd horse and cart here and there. A few kilometers before Fetesti, a train crossed our path, its locomotive dragging an endlessly long white flag behind it.

When I was in this area for the first time, a Romanian farmer invited me to dinner with two friends. They served 'mamaliga' with goat's milk and sheep's cheese. While I ate with appetite, my comrades poked around a little embarrassed on their wooden plates. Then Lieutenant Fritz burst in:

"That's corn, only the pigs eat that at home, and the milk is inedible!"

I became angry:

"Mr. Lieutenant, this farmer gives us his best, that's all he has. If you can't or don't want to eat it, then let it be known in another way, because these simple people have a very fine sense of hospitality. For them, bread is a kind of Sunday cake. Incidentally, there are many peoples of the world who process corn like wheat or rye. We in Bavaria have a saying that probably gets to the heart of the matter: 'What the farmer doesn't know, he doesn't eat.'"

Lieutenant Fritz stood up angrily and left the cottage. The farmer and the farmer's wife looked a little shocked when the other one also stood up. I apologized and continued eating calmly.

At home with my parents, this dish was often served, albeit in a different preparation: "polenta". My mother had seen it made by Italian prisoners of war in Tyrol during the hardships of the First World War. I liked it, regardless of whether it was prepared with milk like semolina porridge or with water. But the Romanians' mamaliga became a delicacy when it was baked again in a dish with cheese or ham, or - as these farmers did - sheep's cheese was added. Unfortunately, my comrades didn't appreciate this, because how can someone who has never left "mother's hearth" know the customs and traditions of other peoples? I knew them, so it came as no surprise to me that my hosts were astonished when I took mamaliga on my plate at a first private invitation in Bucharest: "You are the first German to be our guest and - and there have been many - to eat mamaliga!" With this small gesture, I had made friends and the housewife had taken me to her heart forever. I remembered all this as we flew over the huge swamplands of the Baltas.

The Danube also proved to be a weather divide here, to the east - over the

Dobruja - the sky was as if swept clean. Now at an altitude of around 3500 m, we had a view that could not be bettered in the high mountains with the strongest foehn winds. Only the Danube lowlands were still covered in fog, but the hilly landscape on the eastern side of the river presented a fairytale-like picture in a blaze of color.

The countless tributaries of the Danube ran like thin blood vessels through the more than 20 km wide river basin, the Baltas. A few kilometers to the south, the delicate construction of the railroad bridge at Cernavoda spanned the river. Towards the north, the hilly plateau of Dobruja rose out of the mist, truly crowning this wonderful river landscape, which is also the source of fertility for this country. The Danube had not succeeded in breaking through the Medgidia depression, so it made its way northwards for more than a hundred kilometers until it finally found its way to the Black Sea and, freed from all restraints, poured into the sea in a huge delta.

An immense amphibious area stretched below us from north to south. At Calarasi, a larger tributary branches off from the river, so large that it was often difficult to decide which of the two was the larger: the Borcea or the Danube. Only 70 km further north does it rejoin the main branch, with a maze of water arms, oxbow lakes, swamps and lakes in between, a natural treasure.

A few months ago, following an invitation from friends, I had the opportunity to take part in a hunt. Even though I wasn't a hunter myself and probably never will be, I wanted to experience the wonderful diversity of wildlife in this river country.

Endless alluvial forests with lush vegetation, willow bushes and cane thickets stretched as far as the eye could see. I took my friends at their word when they assured me that this area still served as a hideout for gypsies and light-shy riffraff. In any case, they wouldn't recommend a stranger to enter the area without a guide.

Hunters and Danube fishermen had set up permanent hunting lodges and fishing spots at suitable locations, which could only be used during low water in late summer and fall. The waters had an almost legendary abundance of fish. The sturgeon, a well-known supplier of caviar, made its first appearance. For a small tip, the fishermen took me with them. I was amazed at the simple way in which the catch was made. A sturdy line about 50 meters long was towed between two boats, to which heavy hooks were tied at regular intervals. The moment a sturgeon made a move on the hooks, the towline was hauled in on both sides at a command. Almost regularly, one of the heavy hooks would cut into the head of one of the large fish, which would of course immediately

begin to struggle desperately, but usually in vain. If it was a female, the roe was removed with a few quick cuts and immediately mixed in a barrel of hot oil. The meat went to the fish markets of Galatz and Braila, the caviar had to be delivered to the fishing cooperative. When I later compared the market price with the price the fishermen received, I was no longer surprised. I found it scandalous, to say the least, that these men did not even receive one-fiftieth of the consumer price. I could understand their bitterness.

Never before in my life had I experienced such a wealth of wildlife. The bird life in particular was represented by species that had long been extinct here: Herons, ibises, pelicans, cormorants, moorhens, wild geese, snipes, pheasants and many species of ducks had their nesting places on the countless islands. In a few weeks, however, when the spring floods and the melting snow in the Alps and Carpathians set in, the Baltas were one huge expanse of water.

The Danube not only formed a weather divide here, but also a barrier between Wallachia and Dobruja in terms of ethnic geology. While Romanians were able to develop undisturbed to the west of the river, an unimaginable mixture of peoples had come together in Dobruja: Romanians, Jews, Gypsies, Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Tatars, Turks, Greeks, Armenians, mirror images of the peoples that passed over this land.

A crack in the headphones, Heinrich's voice:

"Put on your breathing mask!"

I disconnected the breathing mask hose from the parachute harness and connected it to the on-board connection. The altimeter showed 4500 m as the dark shadows of the sea emerged from the glow of the haze. A few more minutes and we were over the sea. Like a mighty eagle, the plane made its way across the sky. Compass course 95°. The engines worked quietly and smoothly. Only the trembling of the wingtips gave a hint of the currents to which the big bird was exposed.

Overlap control switched on, film run adapted to the basic speed, I tried a picture flight as a test. The ground moved diagonally through the rectangular ground glass, a sign of considerable drift. Heinrich had to counter a strong crosswind that was coming from the south at this altitude. I tried to read his face, but the breathing mask only left his eyes clear. He nodded at me.

"We'll stay on this course for another 20 minutes or so and then start the approach."

I pulled a double telescope out of the canvas bag next to my seat and sat

forward in the bow of the cockpit. Thin white threads stretched across the dark blue surface of the sea in close succession. Far to the east, I thought I could make out a ship. The needle of the altimeter rose steadily and evenly. We had passed 6000 meters. Below the left surface, far to the northwest, the cloud banks spread out over the Vltava. Parts of Dobruja still lay under thin veils of haze. To the south, the air was crystal clear. We could see as far as the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Varna.

There could be no problems with oxygen. Heinrich leaned forward and tried to look diagonally backwards. I looked over questioningly. He pointed backwards with his thumb.

"Contrails?"

"You could say that," he replied, "we're dragging quite a train."

Unpleasant, but probably impossible to change. I checked the temperature difference. The outside temperature was lower than expected. It was 36° below zero. The water vapor emitted with the exhaust gases froze into billions and billions of tiny ice crystals after just a few seconds. These ice veils sometimes hung in the sky for hours. Not exactly pleasant for a lone reconnaissance pilot.

The compass needle began to move. We turned onto the new course. The wings only tilted a few centimetres. The risk of "stalling" was high at this altitude, despite the huge wingspan. Once height was lost, the flight could be aborted. If we had to repeat the climb, there was a danger that we would get into the range of the Soviet air defense.

Slowly we came onto our approach course: 80°, 70°, 60°. I scanned the sea with my binoculars. I saw land far ahead. A glance at the map, then I pointed downwards:

"Land, starboard ahead," I shouted, like a ship's lookout. "Probably the Crimea."

Another comparison with the map. It had to be Cape Tarchankut, the westernmost tip of the Crimea. In the southeast I saw the silhouette of a mountain range. Somewhere there was Sevastopol, the mighty legendary naval fortress. The compass needle was still turning. Turning at this altitude required unimaginable dexterity. I had already realized on the flight to Bucharest that Lieutenant Heinrich was an excellent pilot. Here he confirmed it again.

My eyes wandered over the sea again. Almost at the same time, we recognized the long strips of spray in front of us.

The closer we got, the clearer the outline became: a battleship or heavy

cruiser, escorted by three destroyers.

Switch to "self-understanding":

"Do you want me to take pictures?"

"Agreed!" replied Heinrich.

"Hold something in front so that we can get all the ships in the picture."

"Understood, will do."

Screen shaft open. Overlap controller switched on. Altitude 7500 m, which resulted in a scale of 1 : 15 000 with the Rb 50/30, that had to be enough.

When the stern of the last escort ship appeared at the edge of the overlap controller, I switched on the device. Five shots were enough to immortalize the entire convoy. The first success of our mission. From the situation briefings, I knew that about two dozen Soviet submarines, around 30 destroyers, torpedo boats and scows had been identified in Sevastopol, Tuapse and Odessa. But only one or two ships of this size.

Heinrich carefully pushed the plane back onto its old course and pulled it into a climb. I could feel the strain on my circulation, even the few maneuvers had brought beads of sweat to my forehead.

I looked at the altimeter: 9000 m. Just a few years ago, this was an almost unimaginable altitude. We now had the sun almost behind us and therefore a glare-free view in all directions. With the naked eye, I recognized a yellow-brown line far ahead: the Tenderowski Haff, to the northwest the vague outline of Odessa.

I thought about it for a moment, then turned to Heinrich:

"Suggestion, we initially stay on 360° and only turn east over the Dnieper-Liman. We will then avoid a turn over Kherson."

Heinrich nodded his agreement:

"Good, but bear in mind that a 90° curve at this altitude has a radius of at least 20 km."

"Got it. What does the dynamic pressure show?"

"310 km/h."

The contours of the Ukrainian coastline became increasingly clear. The sea was not wrongly named. It lay below us in unfathomable darkness. The altimeter showed 10,500 m when I made a strange observation that continued to amaze me on subsequent high-altitude flights.

Due to the visibility of 200 to 300 km, which is almost unimaginable for a layman, I had the impression that we were flying in a huge bowl, the edges of

which prevented us from seeing other worlds. Was the earth not a sphere after all? Was it perhaps even a hollow sphere? Did such observations give rise to the hollow world theory?

Although astronomical science left no doubt that we were floating above a sphere, I didn't know how to answer these questions. Even the double telescope could not dispel this impression. On the contrary, it reinforced it. I couldn't shake the feeling that the distant horizon was not the edge of a section of a sphere, but the edge of a large plate over the center of which we were hovering. Even the north-western tip of the Dnieper-Liman I thought I was at the same height as our plane. A sensory illusion of bewildering proportions.

The fascinating image was overpainted by the color of the sky in a fairytale-like way. The azure blue that the observer perceives from the ground turned a dark purple up here. Vertically above us, the color of the sky seemed almost black. The whole thing was a dream. I never tired of looking. Above us the dark violet of the sky, below us the black-blue water of the sea, against the horizon the improbable glow of the sun-drenched air, interrupted only to the west by huge mountains of cloud. Despite the excitement, I couldn't tear my gaze away from this wonder. This was certainly nothing new for Heinrich; he had perhaps experienced it in a similar way on many previous flights. For me, this flight was an adventure in many respects, something unique that helped to overcome the fear of impending danger.

Over the Jagorlitzkij-Liman the altimeter showed 12,500 m, we were at operational altitude.

"What happens now?" Heinrich called over.

"360° to the mouth of the Bug, then course 90°, leave the mouth of the Dnieper on the right, will be covered in any case. The two airfields north of Kherson are important, then always stay above the river. I'm waving you in!"

We crossed the Dnieper-Liman, which is almost 20 km wide here, and then curved eastwards with a barely recognizable incline. The decisive section of our mission began.

Image slider open. Overlap slider switched on. Basic speed aligned with the frame sequence. The 20/30 series units could now run until the film was through, I no longer had to worry about that. About 600 km<sup>2</sup> of usable new area with one shot of the four Rb 20/30, that was almost unimaginable.

I took another look at my tables and was still able to correct what needed to be corrected. Minutes later, it was over. It was clear to me that the job could

not be repeated.

Flight speed, frame rate, terrain area of a single shot, base length, required number of shots per 100 km flight distance, flight distance per 10 m film, devices switched on.

As expected, there was a dense veil of fog over the estuary of the river, but this gradually dissipated upstream. There was not a cloud in the sky in the rest of the shooting area, no fog, no haze - a real stroke of luck. If nothing went wrong, the photos were excellent. A medal for the "weathermen"!

Again and again I searched the area north of Kherson with binoculars. However, details remained hidden even at maximum magnification. Heinrich had reduced the throttle a little, the engines were running noticeably quieter, but the howling of the turbochargers was all the more audible. I wasn't sure yet, but then there was no longer any doubt: the western field was packed with single-engine aircraft. They were lined up on the northern edge of the airfield, as if on parade. The squat fuselage, the short, wide wings - these were the dreaded RATAs (T-16s). Even if they had recognized us, there would have been no danger, because we knew they could fly just under 6000 m.

We drifted a little to the north. I waved. Heinrich pushed to the right. I had both places exactly in my "sights". My work began again, this time with the large devices.

The eastern site seemed larger and better developed to me. It was directly west of the railroad line to Dnipropetrovsk and had its own rail siding. Here, too, the airfield was packed. Counting was a hopeless task. Twin-engine bombers, probably SB 2, it was probably a whole squadron.

Despite the extreme cold in the rear part of the fuselage, the imaging equipment worked without any problems. I scanned the horizon again and again, but no Soviet aircraft appeared. Over Sadovoje-Nikolskoje I let the 50/30 device run again. We were directly over the stream. Heinrich's anxiety also increased. His eyes were constantly wandering. We had to be prepared for surprises.

Again I was amazed at the high speed over ground. I checked the image sequence time, stopped the pixel migration, calculated again and again, there was no doubt: at an altitude of 12,500 meters we easily reached a speed of almost 400 km/h over ground. That made us almost "fighter-fast". If we were lucky, I wouldn't need a new cassette for the Rb 50/30 - a job that could get pretty uncomfortable at this altitude and would certainly cost me a few drops of sweat.

A look down. To the south-east, the Nogaian steppe spread out like a tabletop. Further south, the isthmus to the Crimea was clearly visible. Towards the east, the Sea of Azov. A few kilometers north of us - lined up like a string - white clouds of steam. I counted almost twenty. That was the Nikolayev-Dnipropetrovsk railroad line! One train after another as far as the eye could see. Unfortunately, I couldn't see the direction of the trains because of the great distance. I pointed out the destination to Heinrich with a wave of my hand.

"Already earmarked."

I was always fascinated by the huge river basin below us. Almost as impressive as the mouth of the Danube. It seemed to me to be an insurmountable obstacle. Below me Berislaw-Nikopol. The Rb 50/30 was running again and everything seemed to be going like clockwork. We were approaching the great Dnieper bend south of Zaporozhye.

"Herr Oberleutnant, we have to swing out further to the east, then course 340°. That's the only way we'll get the airfields and barrage on film."

"Got it, just wave me in."

Heinrich curved right up to the railroad line to Rostov. There was incredible traffic on this line too. Train after train rolled in from Rostov, almost a block apart. There was also a lot going on in the direction of Melitopol. We counted 5 long freight trains as far as Sinelnikovo. The signalmen must have had more than enough to do when we were at home. In the distance, I saw the mouth of the river for the first time, the Don, which barely two years later would become not only the center of my fate, but also the fate of countless German soldiers. Its yellowish-green waters poured into the Sea of Azov, vividly demonstrating the defining power of this legendary river.

All three devices were running. Every detail was important. The airfield in the southeast of the city was bustling with air traffic, apparently a commercial airfield. The field to the northeast was full to the brim with multi-engine aircraft. The marshalling yard was below us, train next to train. I could clearly make out heavy guns with my binoculars. We headed straight for the power station. The huge dam wall spanned the river in an elegant curve and dammed its water over a width of almost 800 meters. The bubbling masses of water were clearly visible downstream, their spray shrouding the river in a fine mist for kilometers. The most modern power station in Russia, I knew, a masterpiece of engineering.

I searched the railroad line to Nikopol, where I also saw freight train after freight train. This was no longer normal train traffic, the density of which would have explained the nearby Donets region; these were signs of military preparations on a gigantic scale.

After barely 15 minutes we flew over Dnipropetrovsk. At the airfield, the familiar SB 2 bombers, squadron next to squadron. The huge goods station was overcrowded. Train after train rolled in from Sinelnikovo. Slowly we turned west. On a large scale, details of the load were certainly recognizable. On the Pytichatkij-Alexandrija-Snamenka railroad line, train after train lined up as far as the eye could see.

It had become impossible to take a close look at the load of each individual train. Between trains with G-wagons, again trains with R-wagons, loading: heavy artillery. Then again trains with hauled vehicles, hauled artillery, low-loaders with tanks and motorized artillery. A never-ending line as far as the eye could see.

I looked at the control instruments and was startled. I could hardly comprehend it: the film of the Rb 100/30 had already run through, and the film of the Rb 50/30 must have run through as well. Anger at myself rose up inside me. I had been a little too reckless. A glance at the map, 30-40 km to Alexandria, I had to be finished by then. My heart was beating like a steam hammer. In my anger, I had forgotten an old principle of every high-altitude pilot: slow movements.

I kept trying to get up from the seat. Panting, I sucked in the oxygen. My legs were as if they had "fallen asleep", my arms were threatening to give out. Again I tried to push myself up with both arms. Cold sweat broke out of every pore and ran down my back. I didn't give up. I finally got to my feet, staggered and threatened to fall forward into the pulpit.

"What's wrong with you?" I heard the first lieutenant's voice as if from far away.

"The cassettes."

That was all I could manage. My mouth was dry as straw.

"Take a slow, deep breath. Keep the oxygen up. We've had enough."

The valve rotated before my eyes. White sparks sprayed around, then I had done it. A little twist. For a few seconds I was on the verge of losing consciousness.

"Take a deep breath. Breathe deeply!" urged Heinrich.

Slowly, my brain began to work again. Far too slowly, it seemed to me. I had finally found my footing, I was standing. Sweat was pouring down my legs. Where were my shoes? Why was I standing in the cold water? Was I dreaming?

Life returned. I slowly undid the strap for the portable oxygen unit and put the carrying strap on. I swayed again and again. What did I have to do next?

Heinrich could be heard again:

"Calm down, calm down! Just don't get nervous. Uncouple the FT hood. Breathe in deeply. Close the valve. Disconnect the hose and connect it to the bottle. Finally pull yourself together. It has to work!"

His voice had taken on a sharp command tone. Open the oxygen valve fully and take a deep breath. Hose loose. Where is the cylinder valve? The coupling piece had slipped off. Then it was done. Where was the coupling for the FT hood? A slight push and the cables were detached.

I forced myself backwards with all my strength. The blood began to circulate again. The fear disappeared. The idling had stopped. With every breath, a new piece of life returned. I carefully opened the lock on the bulkhead. Hoarfrost was forming on the edges. I climbed back to the imaging equipment. The cold gripped me with icy claws, then I felt the warm air flow from the image device heater. I dropped onto the jump seat. Where is the coupling piece for the FT hood? This was also done. With the first hiss, I heard Heinrich's worried voice:

"Are you all right?"

"Everything's fine!"

My hands mechanically followed the commands: Open the protective cover! Close the cassette slide! Open the lock! Cassette lifted off, balanced in the suspension, seat belts tightened. Spare cassette down, put on, lock closed, cassette slide open, protective cover closed. The visual indicator turned. Do the same again with the RB 50/30 - done!

"Change the cassettes!"

"Great, back to the front immediately. Pressure chamber valve closed!"

FT cable disconnected. Back into the cockpit. Bulkhead tight.

I gritted my teeth. Another meter and it was done. I clung to the backrest and bent down to the pressure chamber valve. A little twist and I was sitting on my parachute. A deep gulp of oxygen. Bottle closed. Breathing tube reconnected. FT canopy connected. A look at the overlap controls, the image sequencers lit up. Everything was fine. We could continue. Heinrich nodded to me.

Deep below me, the thin line of the railroad meandered through the vast hilly landscape of Ukraine. Alexandria station. Was I dreaming? Minutes seemed to turn into hours. Never before had I had to wrestle with my own self in such a way. It was wrong to throw myself into this adventure so abruptly. Perhaps it was the illness I had not yet fully recovered from. In any case, I had taken on too much and overestimated my capabilities. I suddenly became aware of the limits of even the most trained body.

I had not forgotten that the road to this moment had been a rocky one. I had to fight my way forward step by step, arduously and laboriously. But now it seemed to me that I had crossed the threshold to a new self-awareness. Only when a person is able to overcome himself does he begin to grow and rise from the dust, begins to realize his strength. He gains respect for himself and learns to respect others, even if they have remained weak. There was no turning back for me now. I had scaled the wall within myself that had denied me access to the city of the self-aware.

"You need to drink something. Take out the thermos flasks. It'll all be over in a minute. The internal pressure is rising!"

Lieutenant Heinrich's commanding voice brought me back down to earth. I sucked in the still hot coffee almost greedily, interrupted by deep breaths from the "oxygen tank". I recovered as quickly as I had collapsed.

"Thanks for the advice."

With my binoculars, I looked for new targets for my cameras. A small train was steaming towards Kremenchug. To the west, towards Snamenka, transport train after transport train rolled by. The large station, the center of traffic, was packed. Tank wagons, trucks, tanks. The cameras were rolling.

"Course 210°, Kirovograd."

"Got it, 210°."

Rail traffic slowed down here. Three trains on the whole route. The airfield moved under the overhead controller. Several squadrons of single and twin-engine aircraft. Presumably P2 or SB2, not easy to make out from this height. The single-engine aircraft were similar to the ME 109, they could be MIG 1 or LaGG 1.

Five freight trains to Pomoshnaya. Clearly visible on a train with R-wagons: motorized heavy artillery. The road leading southeast in both directions heavily occupied by trucks.

"Strange," Heinrich said thoughtfully, "we hardly recognized any oncoming traffic."

I thought about it for a moment.

"There is only one solution: the traffic will be routed back via another route, otherwise such a huge volume of rail traffic cannot be managed."

"You may be right. But that still needs to be clarified."

Unloading at Pomoshnaya station. On the road to Uman, dust cloud after dust cloud. A sign, it seemed to me, that the Soviets were getting the motorized units off the rails very early.

On the railroad line towards Cherkassy, several trains with G cars, with empty trains in between. One look at the map and the cause was clear.

"I've got it! They're sending the empty trains towards Cherkassy via the Dnieper and back north via Poltava. The trains traveling further west come via Kiev."

"You may have found the solution."

Rail traffic became denser again in the direction of Pervomaisk. Mainly trains with G-wagons. Two trains were unloaded at the station.

"Course 160°, stay over the bow."

"Roger that, 160°."

"Lieutenant, shouldn't we take the bow as far as Nikolayev? Who knows when we'll find such ideal conditions again, including a course for Berezovka and Odessa."

"Agreed."

There was one disadvantage: we were flying almost directly into the sun. This meant that visibility was considerably impaired. We had to be particularly careful at the airfield. The road leading east of the Bug towards Nikolayev was empty. On the river a few boats, two or three tows. The picture was different at Nikolayev. The harbor was full. Barges and river steamers on the quays, with smaller ocean-going vessels in between. A large ship under construction or under repair in a dry dock. A strange snaking line from the west bank to the east bank. Was that a pontoon bridge? Smaller vehicles were clearly visible. It was certainly a bridge, but I couldn't make heads or tails of the construction. The Rb 100/30 had to clarify this.

"Maintain course 150°. SO of the city an airfield."

Lively air traffic, multi-engine aircraft throughout, three or four four-engine, no doubt TB 3 transporters.

How could I have known that four months later I would be standing down there?

"Ready! Course 310°."

I scanned the road to Odessa with binoculars. Hardly any traffic, a few trucks, a large convoy of harnessed vehicles, that was all. On the approach to

Berezovka, I recognized a well-camouflaged airfield literally at the last moment WSW of the town. Tucked into the edge of a forest, several squadrons of single-engine aircraft.

Several squat aircraft on the tarmac: Rata J-16. Heavy rail traffic from Odessa. Also some trains in the opposite direction. G-wagons, load not recognizable.

On the approach to Odessa, I realized the importance of the port. The quays were packed. Numerous warships, some submarines. The convoy we observed on the approach had turned in the roadstead. Many smaller and larger merchant ships. Two tugs heading towards the mouth of the Dnieper. Heavy traffic at the passenger and goods station.

Odessa, a young city compared to other Russian cities, had repeatedly made history in this century. I remembered the revolution of 1905, during which the sailors of the armored cruiser "Potemkin" had played such an inglorious role. All that remained of the beacon of the general uprising was what had been known two hundred years earlier as the "Potemkin villages", a façade of unattached nihilism.

What kind of scenes must have taken place on the quays of this city after Denekin's defeat? Russian emigrants in Bucharest had repeatedly described their experiences to me. In 1917/18, the city had to pay a terrible price in blood. Occupied by German troops in March 1918, they were followed by French, Polish and Serbian troops, who remained in the city until April 1919 and brought back unpleasant memories for the emigrants. As the Reds approached the city, hundreds committed suicide in the harbour when they realized that they could no longer be embarked. Thousands tried to reach the Romanian border on foot, but only a few made it. The rest, rounded up and beaten up, could be glad when exile awaited them.

There were countless airplanes of various types on the airfield, mostly multi-engine aircraft. My gaze wandered to the northwest. I counted five freight trains on the railroad line towards Smerinka. The road to Tiraspol was accompanied by a huge cloud of dust. In both directions, an unbroken column of harnessed and motorized vehicles. That was enough, the job was done.

"Imaging equipment switched off, Mr. Lieutenant!"

"Understood, course 180°."

Dazzled by the light of the sun, we floated out to sea again. The tension

eased and you could feel the sigh of relief that went through the pulpit.

The view to the west was uniquely beautiful. We passed the mouth of the Dniester, the almost 40 km long Liman, which separated Bessarabia from the Ukraine. On the west bank was the legendary Akkermann (rum. Cetatea Alba), the White Castle. Ancient cultural soil, soaked in the blood of countless peoples and tribes who pitched their tents at the mouth of the river: Scythians, Celts, Germanic tribes, Dacians, Greeks and Turks. They all left their mark on the land. Every time they broke ground, the earth revealed finds of rare preciousness.

For 22 years, the Romanians were able to push their border guards to this border, but then the Russian bear reclaimed this land from them. A country that was still 65% inhabited by Romanians in 1940. It became the Moldavian Soviet Republic. It was not about pacifying the Romanian working class, but about dominating the mouth of the Danube and thus controlling the river in its entirety. Not even all Romanians realized that the very naming of this Soviet republic was a challenge, because it made clear the claim to the entire territory of the former Principality of Moldavia and thus the transfer of old feudal vassal claims to the present. For Moscow, treaties did not count, human ties did not count. What counted was the law of the strongest.

Just below the coast, half a dozen tugs were sailing, otherwise everything was calm. The cloud banks had retreated further to the west.

"Six minutes at altitude, then descending and heading 180°."

"Understood."

"White mice" were flying around in front of my eyes again. The strain on my circulation was getting to me again. I looked at the instruments. The internal pressure was not stable, it corresponded to an altitude of around 6000 m, which was too low. Either the bulkhead wasn't tight or there was something wrong with the supply line from the compressor.

The altimeter slowly dropped. We couldn't take any risks.

The films were now more important than anything else. At the mouth of the Danube, Heinrich put the plane into a shallow turn. Course 270°.

My gaze wandered over to the marshes of the Danube delta. It was hard to imagine that the mouth of the river had been more than 30 km further west in historical times. What fates and hopes might the river have washed into the sea since then? Bordered by the meander of the Sft. Gheorge in the south and

the powerful, irresistible waters of the Kilia in the north, an almost unmanageable sea of pools and lakes stretched out. In between - a clear sign of human activity - was the narrow ribbon of the Sulina Canal, in front of the mouth of which half a dozen tugboats were waiting to enter.

Far out to sea - it must have been around fifty kilometers - the sand-colored water of the river drew fantastic cloud formations into the dark depths of the Black Sea, announcing the mighty power of the river. Only at Snake Island did the unification finally seem complete. No wonder this river was sacred to the ancients. It seemed to them to be the boundary between this world and the next, the last obstacle before a divine apocalypse. They gratefully accepted the fertility that the river offered them as a gift of nature. In ancient times, the attempt to conquer its waters in dugout canoes must have seemed foolhardy and daring, even a challenge to the gods. Even Ovid himself was not only a prisoner of powerful rulers on these banks, but also a prisoner of the mighty spectacle that the river offered him.

Above the southern edge of the Sinoe lagoon, the altimeter showed 4000 meters. Breathing a sigh of relief, we removed our breathing masks from the valves and hoods. I quickly felt out the recognition signal for the airspace observers. A heavy burden seemed to have been lifted from my shoulders. Maneuvers that only an hour ago had triggered streams of sweat were once again performed with calm naturalness. Heinrich smiled and patted me on the shoulder. The wind had pushed the clouds against the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains. Over Bucharest, the clouds had loosened. Swerving far to the west and northwest, we began our approach. A remnant of the rainstorm temporarily robbed us of visibility. The usual radio traffic to initiate the landing: QAL? After a few minutes we hovered in.

As soon as we reached the parking area, Heinrich switched off the engines. A waiter opened the access hatch from the outside. Two non-commissioned officers from the aircraft training staff climbed into the fuselage. While we were still busy organizing our flight documents, they retrieved the cassettes with the exposed films, stowed them in the back seats of vehicle 15 and disappeared as quickly as they had arrived. We drove to our barracks in the take-off vehicle, changed quickly and freshened up.

Lieutenant Heinrich had invited me to a small snack, which we desperately needed to cheer us up. But nothing came of it. There was a knock. Mr.

Sommer stood in the doorway with Mr. Vachenauer:

"I'm sorry, you can't relax just yet. I've been instructed to pick you up immediately for a flight briefing. You can have something to eat and a coffee there."

While I was gathering my documents, Sommer gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder:

"Well, did you get through everything okay?"

"Thanks, I'm still a bit wobbly on my feet. I'll be better next time."

Thirty minutes later, we were sitting around the large map table in the mission's situation room with Dr. Barth, Mr. Sommer, Mr. Wagner, Mr. Vachenauer and two Luftwaffe staff officers. Lieutenant Heinrich was asked to present the most important findings. Still pale from the strain of the flight, his face clearly marked by the headgear and breathing mask, he began his presentation, which covered all the essential impressions and observations:

"The job was completed without any major incidents. The imaging devices worked smoothly. The heating of the in-line units proved its worth. The motors worked smoothly. In my opinion, the mission was too wide-ranging, which made it necessary to change the film cassettes on the long-focal-length cameras if all the targets were to be photographed for evaluation, and this means 60 percent longitudinal coverage. We flew the first section without a pressure chamber. After completely closing the bulkhead and the valve, it became apparent that the internal pressure was too low, corresponding to an altitude of about 6000 meters. The cause must first be determined. I would ask you to ensure that future orders are designed in such a way that the crew is not endangered. Presumably the order was intended for a crew of four."

Dr. Barth turned to me:

"Do you have anything to add to the report?"

"No, doctor. Everything else is a matter for the aerial survey and aerial image analysis."

One of the staff officers turned to Heinrich:

"How do you assess the situation?"

"In contrast to the missions I had previously carried out in the Baltic states and eastern Poland, the visual reconnaissance alone yielded considerable results here. In the northern section, such findings were reserved for aerial photo analysis. In the direction of Lemberg, rail traffic was almost unimaginable. However, it is quite possible that the weather development came as a surprise to the Soviets. These were mainly motorized units and armoured troops. There is relative calm in front of the Romanian eastern

border. Presumably only supply transports are still involved here. Discharges east of the Dniester and Dnieper lead to the conclusion that reserves are being formed there. This would also confirm the reports from Romanian reconnaissance.

All recognized airfields are heavily occupied. In addition to familiar types, more modern types also appear to be represented. The recognized formations are at least 6-8 squadrons.

To summarize, I can say the following:

1. The Red Army handles transportation services of the greatest magnitude in the reconnaissance area. Some of the trains run at block intervals. Movements of this magnitude require thorough preparation.
2. The deployment in front of the Romanian eastern border appears to have been completed. It is also possible that the deployment of further units in this area is not intended.
3. I am convinced that the Red Army is counting on a

attack by the German Wehrmacht or the Soviet leadership itself makes preparations for an attack. There are no other alternatives."

Dr. Barth turned to me again.

"You mentioned an observation that could explain the management of heavy rail traffic?"

I took a pointer and stood up.

"During the flight we observed that traffic on the Dnipropetrovsk-Alexandria-Snamenka-Belaya-Zerkov railroad line was almost exclusively westbound. In the opposite direction, trains only ran where stations, passing sidings and crossings allowed this. On departure from Kirovograd to Pomosh-Naya I saw several empty trains on the line from Smela to Cherkasy, northbound. When comparing the maps, it occurred to me that perhaps all the empty traffic was being routed back via the Kiev-Lubny-Poltava-Krasnograd line. In this way, the Soviet railroads - despite the predominantly single-track lines - achieve an enormous traffic density. However, as Lieutenant Heinrich has already mentioned, this requires far-sighted planning and organization. I would like to suggest that this assumption be clarified. I would like to make one more comment. The Soviets are not unaware of our approach."

"What makes you say that?" some of the gentlemen asked almost simultaneously.

"Shortly before the Soviet fleet flew over, we trailed a long contrail. Experience shows that the guards on warships are particularly attentive. I cannot imagine that such an observation was not reported immediately. Civilian air traffic is known to take place at much lower altitudes."

"Did you recognize any air defenses?"

"No!"

"Thank you, gentlemen, you are now discharged. Have a good rest."

Dr. Barth came over to me:

"Well, young friend, still dissatisfied? I keep my promises! So don't always be so impatient."

Mr. Sommer shook my hand with a laugh:

"My congratulations. 'Sfintu Gheorghe' lives up to his name. But one question: assuming you were now Chief of Staff of the Red Army, what would you do?"

This question was followed by general laughter. It was also too funny to ask me of all people this question. It seemed to me that Sommer was trying to elicit a response from the other gentlemen. The fact that he casually slipped in my nickname meant that he knew more about me than he was willing to

admit.

"If you think I haven't thought about it yet, you're wrong, I did ten days ago."

Everyone looked at me in surprise.

"As commander of the Red Army, I would either not wait for the German-Romanian-Hungarian units to march up and attack immediately or, in the event of an attack by our troops, I would lead a counterattack with strong forces against the weakest section of the front, namely the Hungarians. In this section, the Red Army has far superior forces: the 26th Army and the 12th Army. Thanks to the occupation of the beech country, the Red Army has five viable crossings over the Carpathians. Regardless of the situation on the other fronts, I would advance with these two armies into the Pannonian Basin, Transylvania and the Bistritz. This would lead to a withdrawal of the Romanian troops in Moldavia within a few days."

Sommer and the other gentlemen looked at each other with concern. Dr. Barth stood thoughtfully in front of the map.

"That would decide the war in just a few weeks!"

Into the silence that followed, the phone rang. Mr. Vachenauer picked up and answered. He listened attentively to the caller, then hung up.

"I can congratulate you, gentlemen. The aerial photographs are of outstanding quality. I would like to thank you and wish you all the best for future flights. In view of the occasion, I must once again point out the absolute obligation of confidentiality. Your complete records and maps will remain here."

The majority had already left the room when Sommer turned around again:

"Don't leave so quickly! You're still needed tonight. I'll pick you up myself!"

Even though the image of this city had changed significantly over the past few weeks, I was still depressed by the carefree coexistence of war and peace that dominated the Bucharest cityscape these days. It was strange how many people were able to live in joy alone and shake off the fear of the future, the presence of war. On the movie screen they enjoyed the shudder of thundering guns, the dusty faces of storming infantry, the howling of dive-bombers, only to throw themselves back into the light-hearted hustle and bustle of everyday life. Did they perhaps realize that they were only a few weeks away from the most powerful battle in history?

This battle had become unavoidable, that was now completely clear to me. I felt the responsibility we had taken on with this flight. It seemed to me as if this responsibility had become mysteriously visible, as if all people had to recognize from our mere appearance how much the decision of the powerful would depend on us, on the few hours in which we could take a look behind the impenetrable wall, built from the building blocks of irreconcilable ideological differences.

I was unable to detach my thoughts from the images that had passed me by in the past few days: the seemingly everyday carelessness in the streets of Berlin, the mobilized restlessness at the train stations in Hungary and Romania; today the approach of a gigantic, culture-destroying steppe fire that could only be countered with a storm surge of determination. Once the steel net had closed around Germany, there was no escape.

It was only here in Romania, in the jungle of the underground struggle, that I realized the hypocrisy of those who claimed to be fighting for freedom, equality and brotherhood of man. There were writings on every corner that proved the opposite; even Churchill's own admission in 1937 that Germany had to be destroyed. There was no talk of morality, there was only talk of power and violence. Again and again I skimmed over a copy of a memorandum written by one of Churchill's closest advisors, a German by origin, how could it be otherwise, in which he stated as early as 1937 that the war against the German Reich must not begin any later than 1939, otherwise Germany's military superiority would make a military conflict hopeless from the outset. This memorandum came into the possession of the Romanian secret service through dark channels.

In view of this hardening of the fronts, it was almost presumptuous to speak of a policy of peace, of the will to reason, of a common European spirit. As Dr. Barth had said just a few days ago: "After this war, the world will be changed one way or another." In this war there could be neither victors nor vanquished, and peace would only return to Europe when it was possible to free people from the straitjacket of hatred and lies and return them to their natural ties to family, homeland and fatherland, to faith in themselves.

Now that I had been granted a glimpse behind the scenes of the great world theater, of politics, I first understood the purpose of the propaganda lies of the opponents, who accused the German Reich of blackmail, violence and the will to destroy, probably to make the world forget that it was they themselves who had blackmailed and plundered this empire since 1919. Colonel Krescu, a convinced Romanian nationalist, had said it clearly enough: "But

gentlemen, what short-sightedness! This war is not being waged against Hitler or Mussolini, the aim is the destruction of Germany, because only by destroying Germany can the old Europe be hit in its entirety. Lenin already said it twenty years ago: 'Whoever has Germany wins Europe!'

Finally released into "freedom", we went over to the dining room for dinner. Our thoughts kept circling around the course of the flight. Where could something be improved? Every detail, no matter how insignificant, could be of the utmost importance for future flights.

"Look, everything's not so bad," Heinrich said on the way to the barracks, "enjoy this time. Who knows what the world will look like in a few weeks' time? Besides, you and I would make a pretty good crew, don't you think?"

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant, I would also like to stay with you. I just don't know if that's what Dr. Barth wants, and he seems to be my 'breadwinner' at the moment. I'm not at all happy about always being pushed back and forth. My only goal is to finally complete my pilot training, and assignments like this are pushing that further and further away."

"I was told you would be available for about four weeks. We can still talk about it then. Don't you think so?"

We carried out a few more picture commissions in other areas with great success. I thought I had finally made the leap into a more successful future, when one morning I was shaken by a violent fever. Once again, the bridge that would have enabled me to reach my dreams was destroyed for a long time. I had to learn to have more modest wishes. How petty, even pathetic, the multitude of human weaknesses that hid behind the façade of ambition and self-love seemed to me in those hours.

"It would have been so nice, but it wasn't meant to be."

A few months later, during the first snowstorms of the approaching winter, an order chased me to Rostov. A division had fallen into the hands of whole carloads of Soviet aerial photographs. They had to be recovered before the troops had to retreat again under heavy counterattacks by the Red Army. I stood on the banks of the Don and knew: I would be back.



## SECTION 2

# A Russian-Ukrainian Way of the Cross

January 10, 1943. 1½ Years had passed since the German Wehrmacht had advanced into the vast expanses of Russia, since it had been able to pin battlefield successes on its banners that led many to believe that this campaign was also a kind of "blitzkrieg" that could be ended in a few weeks - as in Poland and France before. The first Russian winter with its devastating consequences was survived thanks to the unprecedented bravery of our troops. In the early summer of 1942, our armies had reached the Don and the Volga. A new portent loomed over our divisions: Stalingrad.

I had been with this squadron off Voronezh for three months. More and more bad news arrived, giving us an idea of when our area would also become the target of Red Army attacks. In conversations with neighboring close and long-range reconnaissance squadrons, it became increasingly clear that they had warned of the development in good time, but their reports of the deployment of strong Soviet forces on the northern flank of Stalingrad were not given any particular significance. It seemed impossible that the Red Army would still have reserves of this size at its disposal. The Luftwaffe was barely able to fulfill the tactical tasks assigned to it; strategic objectives, which alone would have been suitable to prevent a "Stalingrad", remained a pipe dream.

Wisps of mist fell through the door of our bunker like a thick veil as we stepped out into the shadowy world of the Russian winter morning. The ice on the steps crunched under our footsteps. The cold caused our breath to waft around our heads in thick clouds. Sleep refused to leave our bodies. One close behind the other, we trudged along the narrow path with uncertain, small steps towards the tarmac.

Countless stars shone down on us from the deep night, sparkling like the precious stones of a large, fairytale diadem. Many shadows accompanied our path, the shadows of small Russian farmhouses, shadows of ghostly ruins, behind which the seemingly endless expanse of the airfield stretched out, showing no beginning and no end. The early morning made the cold even more penetrating, even more intense than the scale of the thermometer suggested. Beards of icy frost formed in front of the scarves wrapped around our heads.

No noise disturbed the frosty silence, not a word escaped our lips. Even our thoughts seemed frozen on the shores of this dream world and only slowly broke free from sleep. Deeply clad in our fur-lined overalls, we seemed more like northern hunters than airmen. The thick fur hoods showed our heads in unreal size, as if we were people from another star.

Near the tarmac, the first messengers of the approaching morning woke up. Here and there a shadow emerged from the darkness of the small houses. Here and there a small light flashed for a moment, the fire of a match lit up. In silence, we all strove towards the same goal: the soaring semicircle of the hall. The men on the ground staff in their fur-lined coats seemed even more unfeeling than us, even more ghostly. They too could not find the unifying words, the shouts of encouragement that usually accompanied this journey. What was the point of words? Even so, we were suddenly wide awake and began to freeze. The frost gripped us with its icy paws and tore the tiredness from our bodies.

Our thoughts broke away from the longing dreams of home and turned to the upcoming assignment and its preparation. Everything that had to be done had already become commonplace, a matter of course, and played out before our eyes like the plot of a movie.

In front of the hall, the snow had been rolled in hard and its surface was as smooth as glass. Despite the rubber soles on our flying boots, we struggled to stay on our feet. More out of habit than following a path, we looked for the entrance at the front of the hangar. Werner, our gunner, pushed open the small door, the unexpected brightness blinding us. As we hesitated for a moment, an impatient "Close the door!" rang out from all sides. Although this small, unheated hall could never get really warm, the feeling of security between its walls was enough to get the blood pumping faster through our veins. The light of a spotlight cut a glaring cone out of the darkness, plunging everything else into a pale pallor. In the middle of this cone of light stood our brave AK + BK, a metal bird tried and tested in many enemy flights, which was to carry us into the sky above the enemy this time too. Our eyes slowly glided over the crystal-like glass surfaces of the cockpit to the powerful engines, scanned over the slender tail unit supports to the wide-span wings. Everything seemed devoid of life, dead metal, and yet filled with the full weight of human destiny.

Greetings flew back and forth. The hustle and bustle of our control room and mechanics reminded us how much the success of our mission depended on their work and their diligence. It also made us realize that we too were only a small part of a large community that had been thrown into the furnace of this war.

In front of the aircraft was the bulky block of the preheating unit, whose engine, roaring quietly and evenly, made the cold a little more bearable; but not bearable enough to give room to the "gallows humor" that usually accompanied the preparations for the mission. All the men crowded around

the engine whenever their work allowed, trying to catch some of the relieving warmth it radiated for their limbs, which were stiff with cold.

Karl B., our irreplaceable 1st keeper, came over to me and reported in:

"Good morning, lieutenant! We've been warming up for two hours now. Nevertheless, the oil temperature only rose above zero degrees a few minutes ago. Hein will probably have no choice but to try a cold start."

We turned questioningly to Hein, my trusted pilot, on whose decision the next steps depended. Of course, I was also in a position to judge this myself, but nobody takes personal responsibility for the aircraft away from the pilot. There was no point in hesitating any longer.

"Hein, take care of the bird and then tell me how it looks. We don't have much time left. The mission only makes sense if we're hanging over the front at first light."

We took our parachutes off our shoulders and placed them with our usual care on a decrepit table, then joined the other men at the engine. Friendly greetings here too, but the loud roar of the engine stifled any conversation.

Heinz stepped up to the machine, pushed back the cover and reached for the cylinders through the air intake opening. The stream of warm air that hit him quickly thawed the frost from his scarf. He shook his head:

"Schorsch, the temperature isn't enough yet, the cylinders are barely warmed up. The engine can't cope in this cold. Don't forget, it's 32° below zero outside, even here in the hall it's still minus 15°. We can wait another 10 minutes, then I'll definitely try the cold start. You're right, there's no point in doing the job later."

One of the mechanics who had been working in the shadow of the wing came over to me and showed me his hands wrapped in dirty gauze bandages:

"Look at the mess, Mr. Lieutenant! My skin stuck to the spring struts when we pushed the machine into the hall. What the hell, you can't work with gloves on."

What kind of men were they? For years now, they had been standing in their black, oil-smeared combinations at the machines that had seemingly become the entire content of their lives. Shrouded in petrol fumes, they tirelessly carried out their share of what we called our duty. Their commitment was not mentioned in any Wehrmacht report and was rarely included in a group order. No medals adorned their chests. There were oil stains where the men of the flying personnel were emblazoned with their EKs. Truly, their work no longer had anything to do with the mundanities of a mere professional life. It was part of the battle. Despite rank and decorations, despite all the orders that

emerged from the diversity of the task, there was an infinite series of commonalities, which in turn gave rise to a variety of human relationships. It was not the compulsion to comradeship brought about by the military order that united us; no, it was the joy of it. This was one of the moments in military life that made us realize how impossible, how worthless our service really was without this selfless "being there for each other".

"Man, get lost, go to the doctor right away. That looks worse than a burn. You can't work like that anymore!" He knew me too well, laughed and went back to work. That's how they were. Nobody talked about duty here. They didn't talk about the obvious. And yet, what would the best crew be, what would the greatest bravery mean, if the men of the ground crew had not been able to pass on the aura of security that made the decision to go on the final mission possible in the first place.

Two mechanics applied a gelatinous liquid to the surfaces; poor protection against icing, one of the greatest dangers of winter flying. They worked quickly, because the mass could not be allowed to harden prematurely. The fuel attendant pumped fuel by hand from barrels into the aircraft's tanks. The pump sucked and slurped. It too did not get warm enough to allow the relaxed flexing of muscles that made this work so much easier in summer temperatures. Deeply hooded, the Wart tried to get the warmth that the room could not give him. Werner and I stomped around the preheating engine, took off on a short run through the hall and wrapped our arms around our bodies. But it was all in vain, the paralyzing cold crept up on us again and tried to take possession of us. The first one began to yawn.

"When should we start?" Werner asked me.

"At 5.30 a.m., we'll hardly make it."

I turned to Hein:

"You should have the cold start prepared now, otherwise there will be too much of a delay. We'll lose half an hour if the engines don't start straight away."

Without much ado, he climbed into the cockpit and checked the oil temperature.

"The oil is a few degrees warmer," he called down to me. With one movement, he was back on the floor and exchanged a few words with the 1st Wart.

"Get the machine ready for a cold start!"

Everything was running around like a flock of excited chickens. Werner and I helped the men open the heavy hall doors. The cold crept into the room

in ghostly wafts of mist. Thick clouds of steam billowed out from under the hall roof. A tractor sat in front of the machine and pulled it outside. The doors were quickly closed again.

I myself called the "weatherman" at the group headquarters via the field telephone:

"What does it look like? Will the weather stay like this?"

"It doesn't look bad. It may get cloudy during the morning. Make sure you get away."

Back outside the hall. One of the control room attendants had swung himself onto the surfaces and was pouring well-measured amounts of gasoline into the engine oil. We couldn't lose any time now, otherwise the engines would cool down completely again.

Hein put on the parachute. He carefully tightened the straps. He blew steam in front of him. The thick combination was very cumbersome. You could hear the metallic click of the harness eyelets as they snapped into the safety buckle. A quick tug on the straps and he was ready. Slowly he straightened up from his crouched position, climbed onto the left wing, opened the access hatch and let himself slide into the hollow of the steel-armored seat. He moved the rudders, checked the instruments, then raised his right hand and closed the canopy.

The ground crew men had taken their places around the plane. A man with a fire extinguisher stood diagonally in front of each engine. Next to the left tail unit was the 1st Wart with the starter unit. The cold start was not without danger. The fuel-oil mixture easily caught fire, and then it was necessary to act with lightning speed and courage if the whole machine was not to go up in flames.

We attentively observed the first attempt to start the engine. The propeller on the left-hand engine began to turn with a rattling sound; the cold was still the winner. A second attempt followed. After a few seconds, the engine stopped again, the propeller jerked two or three more times, then everything was quiet again. Was the cold going to win after all?

Another starting attempt. The propeller blades turned again. The engine was working hard. A bang, white-blue smoke billowed out of the air intake ducts and the cracks in the cowling. The control room stood crouched in front of the engines. As if turned by an invisible hand, the propeller continued its rotation. We all looked spellbound at the engine - would it hold out? I saw Hein push the throttle forward a little. The engine bucked once or twice more, then the propeller took off as if it wanted to take the whole plane with it. The "mill" shook and shuddered. Slowly, the hard, slamming run of the engine

gave way to a steady roll and became a powerful thunder. It was done.

The right-hand engine no longer caused any problems. It soon joined in with the low humming of its partner. The temperature rose rapidly. Werner and I got ready. A final check to make sure nothing was missing, a quick handshake with Karl, then we climbed into the cockpit. When I opened the hatch, I was greeted by a blast of warm air. The temperature in the pulpit was already bearable.

I checked the instruments, put the chart board and the message pad in place, took a look at the display unit and the override controller. The cassette slider was open. I reached for the radio and the indicator lamp lit up. After a few seconds, a steady hiss sounded from the headphones. A brief query of the crew via the "self-understanding", then registration with the radio station. The engines ran more smoothly. The temperature rose slowly but steadily. We felt the pleasant warmth. I was able to take off my gloves and open the zipper of the combination a little.

Most of the men had retreated to the shelter of the hall, with only Karl holding out in the freezing cold. If one often speaks of men in life who are simply irreplaceable, Karl was one of them. A machinist by trade, he was one of the oldest among the non-commissioned officers and ground crew. Advisor, counselor and fatherly friend at the same time. He was always there, never tired. Sometimes ranting and raving, then again a helper and comforter. The center of many a fun round. Only a non-commissioned officer in the reserves, his personality was that of an old captain. He had a warm friendship with Hein, but also with me and Werner, the "Bubi", as they all called him, he had that warm comradeship that was more than just being dependent on each other.

"I'll never be a good soldier," he once said to me, "I'm a craftsman. But in war, it doesn't matter where you do your duty. As little as I've ever shirked work, I wouldn't have been able to shirk conscription, even though I could easily have done so in my business."

So now he stood alone outside the machine. We knew that whether we returned depended on his vigilance, his scrutinizing eyes and ears, his reliable hands.

Low above the horizon, the stars began to fade. The night sky brightened. The shadows emerged from their blue-grey monotony and took on color. One look at the oil temperature was enough. Hein raised his hand again. "Ready," Karl said. He pulled the brake pads away and waved "Start clear". With a

cold start, there was no need for the usual "braking". Hein stepped on the gas and the machine began to roll. In front of us was a small tractor with dimmed lights showing us the way to the runway. The driver was barely recognizable, shapelessly wrapped up in a sheepskin coat, he seemed to be one with his vehicle. We rolled over the icy path through the huge snowfield, bumping and rumbling. Then we stood at the start, the tractor turned around and disappeared into the darkness.

I switched to "send" and the noise in my headphones increased.

"Elbe from Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Berta-Kurfürst von Elbe, understood. I hear you with QSA 5. How do you understand me?"

"Also QSA 5!"

"Clear for take-off! Break a leg!"

"Buckle up," Hein shouted, as soon as I had switched back to "EiV". Werner and I fastened the seat belts and locked the seats. The runway lights lit up and drew a light-lined path in front of us that seemed to lead to infinite distances. The engines roared to life. Slowly, the plane began to taxi. Once again I looked back at the gunner, whose outline was barely visible in the phosphorescent light of the on-board lighting. Hein looked calmly at the road of lights. Slowly, he pushed the throttle all the way forward. The propellers rotated faster and faster, the runway lights rushed past. The storm of propellers blew up clouds of ice crystals and whirled them behind us. Bumping and jolting, we began our frenzied run over the sparse runway, over the impressions of countless feet that had turned to ice and paved the way for us.

I remember the astonishment caused by the appearance of the manpower requested to clear the snow. After the first heavy snowfalls, the squadron commander ordered me, via the commander of the airfield, to request manpower from Starost to clear the runway. The old Ukrainian's face, framed by a venerable beard, smiled kindly at me. Maria Leskowa, a young teacher who worked in our "casino", interpreted.

"That's all right," he said, "we'll do it the same way we used to do it with our planes."

As soon as we arrived at the command post, an endless line of hooded women and girls appeared. The gossiping and chattering crowd grew bigger and bigger.

"Maria, for God's sake, what's going on here?" I shouted out to the interpreter, "we ordered men and not women!"

"Leave it alone, Lieutenant," she replied, laughing cheerfully. "Women always do this kind of work here, they can do it better than men!"

Good God, I thought to myself, this could be something; then we set off. In front were our two motorized ploughs, behind them a staggered row of much too small snow ploughs from the village pulled by decrepit horses. These were followed by several rows of 40 to 50 women next to each other, who tamped down the remaining snow with their felt boots. Shrouded in a light veil of mist, they sang their melancholy songs. Slowly, far too slowly, it seemed to me, the work progressed, but when it was done, it was well done. A few more passes with the rollers, the edges leveled with shovels, and the runway was finished, better than we could have expected under these conditions. When the women were given hot tea with lots of sugar from our field kitchen at the end, they were grateful. There was no end to the lively chatter. They were friendly and good-natured, these Russian peasant women. There were no enemies for them. "War no good", they often said to us, "but you good!"

Our plane picked up full speed. The tailplane lifted off the ground and the snow-covered airfield raced below us. The lights of the runway lighting formed an unbroken chain. A slight tremor, an imperceptible movement of Hein's control stick, we took off and flew.

"Fold in, landing gear in," came Hein's voice from the headphones. We slowly gained altitude.

"Course 95 degrees," I called over to him.

He nodded understandingly and slowly turned onto the ordered course. We were still surrounded by dark night. The road and paths, the houses in the village and the church were only vaguely visible.

I threw off the seat belts and pulled the seat forward again. A bright rattling sound shook the plane. Werner had sent a burst of fire into the sky with his twin MG. The tracer bullets rose up like a procession of fireflies and burned up.

"MG all right!" he reported.

We checked the instruments again in the light of the on-board lighting. The engines had long since reached their full operating temperature. Far to the east, the first lights of the approaching day could be seen. Above a slightly pinkish-red glow, the horizon stretched out in a deep blue, more beautiful than the glow of the most magnificent gemstone. Below us, the glow of small lights, which quickly disappeared again, as if they wanted to hide in fear from the big bird up there. Understandably, for the comrades down there, anyone flying in the sky at night was an enemy. They didn't

know how to distinguish between the variety of engine sounds that immediately signaled to the aviator's fine hearing who was up there: friend or foe. Fighter or bomber, fighter or reconnaissance aircraft.

One defect of our machine became clear: long flames flickered from the exhaust pipes of the engines. These fireworks could be seen for miles around. Our control room had to look for a solution. Perhaps lengthening the exhaust pipes or attaching perforated flame pipes; in any case, this had to be remedied, otherwise we were an ideal target for night fighters.

We still had enough time to reach the front of the VII AK on the eastern edge of Voronezh. To the north, to the XIII AK, was only a "stone's throw". That's why we had to pay special attention even now. It was time for me to report to the air liaison commands. I switched to "transmit":

"Or from Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

As soon as I had finished, the voice of the ground radio operator at the FlieVO sounded:

"Berta-Kurfürst, I understand you with QSA 5!"

"Here Berta-Kurfürst, I also understand you loud and clear, thank you, over!"

So this wire was also unwound again. A thin but unimaginably strong wire when we were hanging over the Iwans.

Once again we were alone with our thoughts, even though we knew that countless comrades were listening up to us down there. The engines ran quietly and evenly. There was something soothing about their humming. The circles of the propellers took on a bluish-silver glow in the first lights of day.

"They're still asleep at home," Hein suddenly said. My thoughts had involuntarily wandered home too.

How were they supposed to suspect the danger that was approaching at home and that we were simply trying to suppress? When danger has become a constant companion in life, it becomes a habit, and we no longer take note of the familiar. When death multiplies a thousandfold, it becomes commonplace. Where is its significance for people?

The horror is not in death itself, I think, but in the agony that precedes it. Death is the end, we know that. The desperate, painful rebellion is our fear. It is not the falling down, the being hurled down, hit by the bullets of enemy hunters; it is the minutes in which we may drift rudderless as a burning torch across the sky, that is horror.

The Russian hills below us were still plunged into deep darkness, while

above the distant horizon the first rays of the sun flashed across the firmament like colorful lightning. It was still deep night behind us. Countless stars shone above us, sparkling like gems on the belt of the sky hunter on his hunt through eternity.

For many weeks we had been the only flying unit in the area of the 2nd Army. The predictions of those who were able to judge the military development on the Eastern Front in a unique way from a deep knowledge of the historical context and the strength of the enemy had been confirmed. If it had still been possible to absorb the shock of the winter of 1941/42 and launch another attack, there could no longer be any doubt that the fortunes of battle had turned in our opponents' favor. Far to the south-east, on the banks of the Volga, the battle for Stalingrad was drawing to a close. There was hardly a soldier who did not keep thinking of those comrades who were making their final sacrifices there.

The total miscalculation of the technical and organizational possibilities available to us to supply the encircled units from the air led to decisions that only accelerated the catastrophe. Long-range reconnaissance had reported that the Soviets were already beginning to withdraw the first divisions from the encirclement ring. This made it possible to foresee the time when the front in front of the 2nd Hungarian Army and the 2nd German Army would also begin to waver. Vigilance was required, the calm on the front was deceptive.

The majority of the close reconnaissance units had been converted to the FW 189 during the summer of 1942. After a few weeks, it became apparent that this aircraft was no longer up to military requirements. The losses became ever greater.

Equipped with two AS 411s, each with 575 hp take-off power, it reached almost 280 km/h, with a flight time of approx. 2 hours and 45 minutes. The penetration depth was therefore limited and the aircraft was too slow. Certainly, the aircraft had ideal flight characteristics, but not for such a versatile combat mission as was required for close reconnaissance in the third year of the war. The often suggested installation of more powerful engines, such as the Gnome-Rhone twin radial engines captured in large numbers, was not permitted by the airframe. The armament was inadequate, although equipping the aircraft with the fast-firing MG 81 brought a significant improvement. While the conversion to this aircraft had been viewed very positively by the older generation of reconnaissance pilots, this opinion very quickly gave way to great disappointment. The FW 189 was no

longer able to fulfill the expectations placed in it.

What had we already experienced with this plane? Flying back from an enemy flight, we spotted several mounted batteries about 20 km behind the Soviet lines on the march to the front. We immediately decided to attack with on-board weapons, and the machine guns were sufficient to achieve a considerable effect. We had succeeded in surprising them. Hein opened fire from his two fixed machine guns at just a few hundred meters. The horses reared up and raced into the fields, taking the guns and the protruders with them. The chaos was complete when Werner fired his twin machine guns into the confusion. We had reached the front of the column when a heavy blow shook the machine. We thought we had been hit in the cockpit; then we saw and felt the damage. The shock of the machine gun fire had released the locking mechanism of the access hatches. They had flown off with a loud bang and hit the horizontal stabilizer. We were literally sitting in the open air, and it was minus 20 degrees outside.

An incident with highly fatal consequences! The pilots only used the fixed machine guns in an emergency. They were no longer used for ground combat support.

Another time we tried to evade the attacks of Soviet fighters with a steep glide, but that was far from a dive. Suddenly some of the windows of the cockpit flew around our ears.

However, the attempt to attack Soviet battery positions with some aircraft in order to help our infantry, which was under heavy fire, and to give them some relief, had disastrous consequences. During the glide approach, it must have been around 30°, the wing of one of our planes broke. Due to the immediate steep spin, the crew was unable to bail out. With the entire bomb load, four times 50 kg, the plane exploded in a huge fireball on impact close to the position.

A little later, with the shock still fresh in our minds, one of our old pilots, Sergeant Makiola, took off on a workshop flight with our foreman. The purpose of taking him along was actually no other than to secure the "small flying allowance" for the master. Makiola could easily have flown alone. From a bench in the command post, we watched as the pilot performed the usual, harmless flight maneuvers. Then, we cried out in horror, a wing broke off in a slight curve. The plane crashed like a withered lime blossom. Makiola still managed to jettison the flap. However, neither of them was able to get out due to the violent spin. Seconds later, they touched down in a

swampy area. That was the end of their confidence in this bird.

How we envied the Russians for their Pe-2 and IL-2, the Americans for their Lightning, the British for their Hurricane, not to mention the Mosquito that had just appeared.

Our tension increased the closer we got to the front. I tried to spot lights behind the lines with the double binoculars. We were not mistaken, the Iwans were literally driving with "fixed lighting". To the north and south of the Usman forest, north-east of Voronezh, you could see whole chains of lights. The stations were brightly lit by floodlights.

Werner had long been behind his machine guns. His head was constantly circling, he couldn't take his eyes off the airspace behind us and the landscape, which was still plunged in darkness. We had to recognize "the white in the eye" of the enemy before he saw us. Seeing here meant life; being blind meant death. No enemy hunter was allowed to come upon us by surprise, sensing us as easy prey. If we recognized him first, the danger was half the danger. The FW 189 was slow and not particularly robust, but it was very maneuverable in the hands of a good pilot. We felt like matadors in the big arena, able to defeat the blind bull with our skill and lightning-fast reactions alone.

A few more minutes and we were hanging over the front line. Even in the deep darkness down there, their ghostly signs were visible: here and there the bursts of fire from machine guns twitched, the beams of tracer ammunition shot across to the enemy, flare cartridges burned up in the pale darkness, drawing strange dancing circles on the snow. Then, all of a sudden, the sun appeared. What was that sight? Arc after arc of light rose above the horizon, drawing a picture of unimaginable beauty.

We now had to be an ideal target for enemy anti-aircraft fire. We were almost 3000 m high, a glowing bird, clearly visible against the dark sky, that was dangerous. Still plunged in deep shadows, the snow-covered ribbon of the Don, behind it: Voronezh. There was a fierce firefight going on in the southern part of the city. This was where the famous "White House" was located, where a foolhardy Ivan raiding party had succeeded a few weeks ago in establishing a small bridgehead on the western bank of the Voronezh (the river flowing into the Don just south of the city also bore this name), which could no longer be penetrated despite the efforts of the 88th ID. Down there, the opponents were often only a few meters apart. Every movement, every noise could bring death. The hours and minutes immediately before dawn were particularly dangerous. The morning cold ate into their coats and

headgear, made them tired and hungry and paralyzed their attention. With lightning speed, the Siberian riflemen plunged into the trenches and took prisoners.

In the past few weeks, I had only had one opportunity to pay a brief visit to the city down there. Even the deep wounds inflicted by the fighting could not detract from the beauty of this cityscape. You could feel at every turn that this city once harbored a rich cultural life within its walls. Somehow I had the impression that even the revolution had hardly changed anything about it. I knew that its university had produced a number of important minds of the Russian Empire and that the city had been a decisive impetus for the fine arts.

May the distant hum of our engines mean to our comrades down there that they were not yet left alone. We could no longer give them back the feeling of equality that was once there when we stormed off in 1941, when the Luftwaffe seemed omnipresent. Today, it meant a lot to the Landser if a lone reconnaissance plane flew through the sky once or twice a day. Yes, we were there, as we had been from day one. Not covered in rest, like fighters and Stukas, hunted and hounded, bleeding from many wounds, we kept pushing forward into the glowing sky above the enemy, pointing the way for tanks, infantry and artillery.

"Course 110°, keep south of the mouth of the Voronezh!"

"Understood," Hein nodded over.

We knew the enemy's weak points. So far, the approach had almost always been successful without any major fireworks from the Soviet anti-aircraft guns. Then I heard Werner's excited voice:

"Flak fired, several batteries!"

Hein calmly pulled the plane into a right-hand turn and let it slip a little. Lightning flashed next to us like the harbingers of an approaching thunderstorm: exploding anti-aircraft shells. Our bird began to shake under the force of the explosions. Muffled thuds drummed against the fuselage and wings, causing the plane to tremble right up to the tips of the wings. The "comrades" down there were shooting with frightening precision. They weren't beginners. Clouds of explosions piled up around us like balls of absorbent cotton, shining bright white in the first sunlight. They covered the sky like Christmas tree decorations.

"The batteries are on the eastern edge of Berezovka," Werner reported. An important observation. I marked the positions on the map with tactical

symbols.

As soon as we had got through this "welcoming ceremony", I pulled my seat as far forward as possible. This gave me an excellent view in all directions. I scanned the area east of Voronezh with my binoculars. A string of lights a few kilometers NE of the city: the small Borovoje train station. During the day, this area seemed devoid of life, but now there was a lot of freight traffic. In the light of the headlights, I recognized a train, mainly with G wagons and another with R wagons, which was already unloaded. Suddenly the lights went out, that was an "air alarm". Special attention was required here, as the railroad line was peppered with anti-aircraft guns.

My eyes wandered further north. Again I recognized a brightly lit spot in the middle of the forest: the Krasnolesny railroad station, where there was also heavy loading activity. They felt pretty safe, the Iwans. Apparently they hadn't been warned yet.

Far to the north, on the edge of the large forest area, an endless row of dancing fireflies. The starting point was Usman station on the Voronezh-Misurinsk railroad line. Unbelievably, they were traveling up there with open headlights, so little did they have to fear from the German Luftwaffe. I sketched this observation on the map with a few quick strokes. This was what I had suspected for some time: significant parts of the supply lines were not heading towards Voronezh, but to the west towards Liwny, i.e. in front of the XIII AK front. In these minutes of the fading night it became clear that the Ivan was also preparing for a major attack in our front area. Hein could be heard:

"It's like a Reichsparteitag<sup>1</sup> down there. We should have started in the dark more often."

"Right, no fighters, no Stukas, they can do what they like. We have to get close to the railroad line at Borovoje. Course 360°."

The aircraft banked into a long curve. I quickly sent the first observations to our radio station and that of the VII AK.

Again the hasty shout from Werner:

"Flak has fired!"

Hein reacted just as calmly as during the first fire attack. A left turn, a little more throttle, the plane pulled slightly into the sky, then a right turn, an upswing to the left, another rapid dive and a long right turn. The "flak waltz" began, which Hein had mastered so well.

I searched the area feverishly. Once again, the flaming spears of numerous cannons shot into the sky. I could clearly make out the firing between the groups of houses on the eastern bank of the Voronezh. There must have been

about twenty tubes spitting fire down there. A very cleverly laid anti-aircraft trap!

"Blasting clouds close behind us," I heard Werner shout. Hein continued the dance: a short right turn, a long left turn, a downswing and then up into the sky again. No movement was allowed to be predictable, it was the variations that mattered.

That strange puffing sound again, the plane shook. Cloud after cloud of explosives piled up around us. The explosions were getting closer and closer. A bright flash a few meters in front of the cockpit, our bird groaned in every joint. That could have "hit us in the eye".

Constantly twisting and turning, we tried to get to Borovoje. It was boiling around us as if we were flying through a witch's kitchen. We were constantly thrown back and forth by the explosive pressure of the shells. None of us had ever experienced such anti-aircraft fire. This alone proved to us that this flight was not in vain. The heavy anti-aircraft fire was now joined by countless clouds of medium-caliber explosives. If only that went well! Drops of sweat rolled down my face. We couldn't give up. At last we were directly above the station. I could clearly make out the two freight trains. One of them was being unloaded via an overhead ramp: heavy artillery. The other train, consisting mainly of G-wagons, was carrying unrecognizable supplies and provisions. On the eastbound railroad line, a few kilometers outside the station, there was an armored train, now a fire-breathing monster.

An anti-aircraft platoon that was used to protect the railroad stations near the front. A few hundred meters below us were countless clouds of light flak, like a carpet of freshly shorn wool. They must have known that we were flying higher than their guns could reach, or was the magic just to make us nervous? A few kilometers further on, a long freight train, all G-wagons. Heavy vehicle traffic on the roads, many harnessed vehicles, but also countless trucks.

Suddenly the fire subsided. A fireball here and there. We were through.

"Course 90°, we have to get back to the railroad line."

"You must be tired of life," Hein grumbled into the microphone, although he had long since realized what it was all about.

The army's ground radio station responded:

"Berta-Kurfürst, repeat the previous messages and report any new results. We were not on reception. Over!"

They came at the worst possible time. I quickly switched to "Send":

"Unloading of motorized artillery and unidentified supplies and provisions, Borovoje station. Approx. 2 km east of the station an anti-aircraft

armored train. Then a freight train with approx. 50G wagons under steam, direction Borovoje-Woronesch. Loading work recognized at Krasnolesnj station and Usman station. Heavy vehicle traffic from Borovoje station to the W and SW. In the dark, heavy motive power traffic from Usman station to the west, towards Studenki-Stupino. A transport train on the Voronezh-Davidovka railroad line, heading south towards the small Don bend. Anti-aircraft fire of unprecedented intensity, E and NE Voronezh."

"Berta-Kurfürst, we have understood. Thank you. Over!"

We carefully felt our way towards the railroad line in the direction of Orlovo. The snowfields below us began to light up, the sun had now reached the hills. Banks of mist here and there in the hollows. I pulled my sunglasses over my eyes. Now it was time to be doubly careful. The hour of the hunters had come. Our eyes had to be everywhere. Danger loomed, especially out of the sun.

"We still have the bombs underneath," warned Hein.

Right, I would soon have forgotten the "eggs".

"Course 45°, we are approaching Krasnolesnj station."

Bombsight switched on, short test approach, a small course correction and we were ready to go. I carefully steered Hein into the target.

"A little to the left, a little to the right, even further to the right, now stay on course!"

The railroad line and station came into view. The first wagons were visible. I pressed the release button four times in quick succession and four bombs, each weighing a tenth of a kilogram, detached themselves from the surfaces and raced towards their target, bringing death and destruction. Still facing the target, in the next second I recognized the muzzle flash of an anti-aircraft battery. Werner's and my voices were heard almost simultaneously:

"Flak fired!"

The bombing had brought tangible relief. Hein pulled the plane into a steep turn. The anti-aircraft shells were far away.

A heavy battery of this caliber was new to the area. One more insight.

Werner drew our attention back to the station:

"Great, the bombs are sitting right on the train."

We turned back. The billowing smoke from the explosive clouds was clearly visible. Wagons began to burn. The smoke was getting darker and darker. Fuel or oil must have gone up in flames. If only we could have brought more bombs with us, we could have thoroughly disrupted the fire-fighting operations. So as not to make things too easy for the Iwans, we stayed near the station for a few minutes. The black clouds of smoke lay over

the snow like a bank of fog.

"Course 45°."

We crossed the railroad line again. Hein drew my attention to countless small clouds of smoke rising almost vertically into the sky in the western part of the huge wooded area, a few kilometers behind the front near Berezovo. These could only be extensive bunker positions. A valuable observation, as the forest there seemed deserted during the day.

The sun's rays had now reached the snowfields in the west. Night finally gave way to day. The land below us sparkled and glittered in unimaginable splendor, shining in immaculate white. The traces of war were barely recognizable. As far as our eyes could see, covered here and there by veils of mist or haze, the Don region lay spread out below us.

We flew in long curves towards Usman station. Details became visible in the binoculars. A train had left the station heading north. A second train was still being unloaded. On the roads to the west and southwest, smaller motorized columns were trying to reach the forest area, leaving deep tracks in the snow. There must have been a lot going on here during the night.

Werner's worried voice distracted us:

"Look to the west, there's a huge wall of cloud approaching. That looks like snow. The weatherman<sup>1</sup> didn't say anything about that, did he?"

Hein turned over thoughtfully.

"There was no mention of snow, he just said it would cloud over during the morning," I replied. I also felt uneasy, as there was no sign of the snow front ending either to the north or the south. Was this the cause of the strange calm in the air? We hadn't seen any fighters or fighter planes yet.

Hein had gone as far east as Zavalnoje to avoid the village of Usman itself. We tried to fly towards the station out of the sun. With engines throttled back, we hovered towards our destination. Altitude 2500 m. It was very important that we recognized the loading of the wagons or at least brought aerial photographs that allowed us to do so. I checked the lighting conditions. The lighting was scarce, but it had to be enough. I extended the exposure time and turned off the filter.

"Hold direction and altitude, I'll take some pictures."

I hastily cranked open the picture slot and switched on the picture device. I adjusted the frame tracker. Shot after shot was taken. The quality of the images depended very much on the smoothness of the flight. The lower the pixel drift, the sharper the image. Nothing escaped the sharp eye of the camera. Much of what remained hidden to the eye only became visible in the aerial image. Heights and depths began to emerge under the sharp

magnifying glasses. The evaluator did not miss the trail in the forest, the sledge tracks across the fields, the vehicles in the shadows of the trees and houses.

Two or three minutes and we were vertically above the station. A locomotive was emitting white clouds of steam into the morning air.

"Attention, anti-aircraft position west of the station," warned Werner.

No sooner had he called out than the muzzle flashes appeared. At this height, we were an ideal target for larger calibers. Hein made a downswing. I hit the side of the ship hard, then it pressed me to the ground. At the last second I got hold of the handhold and managed to avoid the danger of being thrown into the "bag" with Werner. That's what happens when you don't fasten your seatbelt! It was only a matter of fractions of a second.

When the film was later developed, it turned out that, as so often in life, chance had been the master here too. The extreme oblique shots taken during the downswing produced images of rare beauty: huge towers of clouds towering over sun-drenched snowfields. They depicted a moment in our lives for which we ourselves could not find the words.

In conversation with army comrades, we were often asked what the reconnaissance man had to do to be successful. The answer was simple: it was not the success of a single man, it was the success of three men who were welded together for better or worse. It was the unity of will, the commonality of courage and fear, the commonality of thoughts and feelings that we had grown together in a multitude of flights. If just one failed, it could be the death of all. If I had my eyes on the binoculars, on the overlap controller, on the bomb sight, then the eyes of the others were in the airspace around us. They bored their eyes into the light of the sun and the shadows of the fading day. No hunter had surprised us yet, even if he may have often thought he had easy prey "in front of the shotgun". Although still young in years, we were "old hands" who sensed danger in good time. Often enough, we recognized the enemy together and saw him at the same time as he rushed towards us with lightning speed to snatch us out of the sky.

Heinz Holzhey was a book printer in his civilian life. He was not a rash go-getter, but rather a cautious, tentative person. He flew carefully and deliberately, as if he were choosing the right type from a myriad of letters, as if he were considering the form of a sentence. And he could fly, you had to give him that. Sure, he wouldn't have made a good fighter pilot, but he was the ideal reconnaissance pilot.

Werner Godhusen, the gunner, was an industrial clerk by trade and also one of the youngest members of the flying crew, which probably earned him the name "Bubi". Unwavering calm, courage and prudence were his special characteristics. I saw in him the original version of the hamburger as it is written in the book. He had the sharp and incorruptible eyes of a sailor and a rare sense of impending danger. They must have been like him, the lookouts in the masts of the old Hanseatic ships.

What was our most urgent task? Not adventurous air battles! Coming back and reporting, taking aerial photographs, that was the most urgent task of the close reconnaissance aircraft. The army command would have loved to see us as a kind of "all-purpose air force", but we couldn't and weren't allowed to be that. Our success was not in the number of kills or the tons of bombs dropped. We had to look into the enemy's "parlor" and report what we saw there to the leadership. Invisible threads stretched from our machines out into the battle, all the way to the last company. Not killing, but leading and guiding. Our flights were not foolhardy combat, not the fencing of gladiators. They were the adventure of discovery in the ever-changing world of war.

The happy coincidence of people in the crew of a reconnaissance aircraft who complemented each other in such an exemplary way is certainly very rare. The fact that we survived so many enemy flights unscathed despite our technical inferiority was probably also due to this.

Gliding at top speed, we evaded the anti-aircraft fire. At last I found the opportunity to close the screen and switch off the camera.

"Down to low-level flight, then course 270°. We have to approach the runway again."

Over the hills far northeast of Storoschewoje, Hein tore the plane into a left turn just above the ground. We were now about 90 km behind the Soviet lines. We had the least worries about the approaching storm. Still on the downswing, our eyes were directed NNW, towards Lipetsk. There were fighters there, at least one La 5 squadron, and if they cut off our return route, we knew that no amount of prayers would help. One of the fighter planes that had recently chased us home had a whole series of kills painted on it, so we had to be on our guard.

Lipetsk, which had become an industrial town from the small seaside resort of the Tsarist era, had played an important role in the history of the Luftwaffe in many respects, I knew that. I was very familiar with the resulting

problems, because it was not the first time that the research office had received news that gave rise to fears of the worst. Now there was a testing center for special weapons. Experts suspected radio measuring devices. In October I was therefore ordered to fly an aerial map of the area. The results of the analysis were kept secret.

In the 1920s and 1930s, around two hundred German officers and non-commissioned officers were trained here as pilots and observers. Numerous commanders of the units that were now deployed had completed their first solo flights here. It was one of the places where the Reichswehr and the Red Army had met most peacefully barely 15 years ago and created the basis for a cooperation that gave no reason to expect that it would ever come to such a gigantic struggle. However, this cooperation was also the nucleus of the Tukhachevsky Affair, the horrific massacre of Red Army officers in which many thousands of soldiers of all ranks, mainly staff officers, fell victim. Those who did not collapse under the bullets of the G.P.U. firing squads disappeared without trace in the regime camps in Siberia. In this way, Stalin had secured the "loyalty" of the Red Army, which was threatening to slip away from his leadership, in an unimaginably brutal manner.

What was not new to me was the fact that these training centers raised questions in a completely different respect, the answers to which became more and more urgent the longer the war lasted. It had become known that the Soviet counterintelligence had succeeded in recruiting collaborators among the German officers and NCOs, some of whom had been recognized in the meantime, but the most important figures still remained unknown. Although the RSHA and the Research Office had cast a close-meshed net over the group of people in question, the big "fish" did not get caught in it. They were certainly sources of inestimable value to the Red Army. It was no coincidence that these suspicions were not unfounded, as the suspicion was confirmed time and again that the Soviet leadership had been informed in good time of decisions made by the High Command and was able to prepare its countermeasures accordingly.

Skilfully skipping trees and hedges, we flew towards the railroad line. Hein was getting restless now. I saw how his eyes kept wandering to the horizon. The clouds were piling up higher and higher. They shone in the sun like glaciers and snowfields in distant mountains. Within a few minutes, the haze in the hollows and valleys had given way to crystal-clear air. A rising westerly wind had swept away the last clouds.

"You, that doesn't look good."

"It can't be that bad, otherwise we would have received a storm warning long ago," I replied.

During the last 10-15 minutes we had repeatedly heard unintelligible speaking noises, possibly it was a call from a ground station. Due to the low-level flight and the great distance to the front, nothing could be understood.

Again we heard this barely perceptible fluttering and rattling. "Wait, I'll pull the machine up," growled Hein.

Despite our dangerous position, he flew in a sweeping turn over the sparsely populated area northeast of Usman to gain altitude.

Almost at the same time, we heard the still somewhat indistinct voice of a ground radio operator:

"Berta-Kurfürst, can you hear me? Berta-Kurfürst, come in please! Order from Elbe: Abort order immediately. Blizzard warning. Berta-Kurfürst, cancel order immediately!"

Apparently, the squadron had commissioned the radio stations of the divisions close to the front with the transmission.

I switched to "Send":

"This is Berta-Kurfürst. Storm warning understood. Aborting the order is pointless. We can no longer evade!"

I repeated the confirmation several times.

"They're crazy, a weather situation like this doesn't develop in an hour," Werner said excitedly.

I shrugged my shoulders helplessly.

As a precaution, I prepared my navigation documents so that I could get to work as soon as the "dance" started. The equipment was meagre enough: course ruler and Knemeyer. Then we continued our mission.

"How long will the fuel last?"

"Just under 45 minutes!"

"So the matter is clear. So emergency landing or through, what else is there to do?"

Back on a westerly course, we sped a few meters up towards the railroad line. Here the flight characteristics of the FW 189 came in very handy. Thanks to the smooth running of the engines, we managed to surprise them again and again. The bright light of the sun-drenched snowfields made flying not without danger. Obstacles were recognized too late, estimating the flight altitude was more a matter of feeling than exact determination. Problems that are not unknown to sea pilots. After the jump over the railroad line, we turned onto a SSW course. The left wing almost touched the ground. Snow clouds

rose up. Again and again we made short jumps over snow-covered trees and bushes and small farmsteads. The inhabitants looked up at us in surprise. Some of them waved. By the time they recognized the crossbeam, it was usually too late. Occasionally someone would throw themselves into the snow. Hein gave himself over completely to the thrill of speed. The snowstorm and the war were forgotten. He flew, the only thing missing was that he began to sing.

"Stay on the west side of the railroad embankment."

First a small black dot, then suddenly a steaming monster: the locomotive of the northbound train. We could clearly make out the driver and stoker.

Behind the locomotive 8-10 freight wagons, followed by around 30 R-wagons, all empty. We continued towards Usman station. On the other side of the embankment, the first houses of the village. A few hundred meters further on, the next train. The locomotive was shrouded in white clouds of steam. Light anti-aircraft guns on one of the carriages. They hadn't recognized us yet. Some soldiers or railwaymen were sitting in their long coats on the embankment right next to the tracks. Most of the stake wagons had already been unloaded. At the very back, tanks rolled over the head ramp, white-sprayed T-34s. I counted eight. A little way off the head ramp, another wagon with light anti-aircraft guns. The operator was lying next to it in the snow. Barely twenty meters in front of us, they jumped up and tried to get onto the wagon. Werner's machine guns began to rattle, the bullets hammered into the locomotive and the wagons. We came up to the small station building. Behind it were perhaps two dozen small trucks. Crates and barrels were stacked in high piles. Startled, the Red Army soldiers ran around and took cover. The surprise had succeeded. As they took off, the light anti-aircraft guns and machine guns began to fire. The anti-aircraft battery SW of the station joined in the furious defensive fire. Chains of tracer ammunition passed over us. The Iwans could not keep up with this rapid low-level flight. Hein tore the plane over a small wood, skipped another row of trees and then we were saved. In the treetops behind us, bursting shells threw up clouds of snow, no longer dangerous for us.

The train crew had probably not assumed that we would come back flying low again. They were too sure - so far behind the front line. What we had seen was enough for us. We had achieved what we wanted.

"Course 240°," I shouted to Hein.

There was no more time to lose. Almost three meters high, we chased over the long, snow-covered hills. Despite our goggles, we were blinded by the enormous amount of light. We flew over the road to Studenki. Covered

vehicles, sledges, several companies of infantry. The first Red Army soldiers quickly threw themselves into the snow; it was already too late for the others. We looked into the completely surprised, helpless faces of the men.

"They're standing there like tin soldiers," shouted Werner. He could see the Iwans' reaction better than we could.

We kept close to the road. It still bore all the traces of the heavy night traffic, deep ruts from the tanks and trucks. After a few minutes, we had reached the edge of the large forest. Movement close in front of us: Men in snow coats jumped up and tried to reach the protective forest. Armored tracks to the edge of the forest. As we flew past, we recognized them: perhaps 30 T-34s, sprayed white, with numerous trucks in between. They had all retreated into the shadows of the trees. A few hundred meters higher and we wouldn't have seen them, they would have remained hidden from us.

"The comrades have camouflaged themselves well," Werner remarked.

"That's a great mess," said Hein, "do we expect such reinforcements?"

"You can work out when it's going to start for us!"

The divisions had reported that the listening posts in the front trenches had detected increasing unrest, but there had been no talk of reinforcements on this scale. Our crews had not recognized this anywhere either. Certainly, here and there the Iwans' assault parties became more frequent, the snipers more annoying, the artillery fire more systematic. In general, however, the front was still quiet.

If we got home safely, the intentions of the opposing leadership were revealed. They knew that and would act accordingly in the future.

Again, the confusion of distant speech sounds came out of the headphones, again they remained unintelligible. It was enough of a reminder. We almost forgot about the weather in the rush of flying low. Huge mountains of cloud loomed menacingly in front of us. There was no point in diverting to the north anyway, we could have landed at one of the Soviet airfields straight away. If we had been warned in time, we might still have reached Kasatskoye to the south. Now our fuel supply was no longer sufficient. We had to be happy if we reached our own territory when the storm started and could "lay" the plane somewhere in the snow.

I hurriedly checked my registration documents and transferred the last observations to the registration pad and map. I sketched down my impressions. In the excitement of battle, it was all too easy to forget details that could be decisive later.

"Hein, stay low above the forest, the magic is about to start."

A few meters below us, the crowns of the trees bent under the weight of the masses of snow. Thin, blue columns of smoke rose up sporadically. Signs of well-camouflaged bunker positions.

The calls from a ground station became clearer:

"Berta-Kurfürst, come in. Berta-Kurfürst, can you hear us? We repeat severe weather warning: snowstorm from 280° with 80-100 km/h, cloud height at the site fluctuating between 50 and 100 m. Air pressure 742 mm. Did you hear us?"

There was no point in confirming the call. We were too low.

A few more kilometers and we reached the edge of the forest between Stupino and Berezovo and saw the Voronezh. Sliding down from the high trees, we literally fell into enemy positions. Here, too, the surprise was total. We could literally look down the tubes of a Soviet heavy anti-aircraft battery and not a shot was fired. They didn't have time to run up to the machine guns. Completely surprised and frozen to pillars of salt, the soldiers looked up at us. We chased over the chimneys of the houses in Stupino. Between the houses there was a lot of activity. Then the icy ribbon of the Voronezh. Battalion positions again, the long barrels of a cannon battery clearly visible. Infantry in platoons crossed the ice of the river on a beaten track. Behind them were a large number of heavily loaded sledges. We had to be on our guard. The traffic was still too heavy for an icy winter morning.

Hein moved the machine onto the hills between Voronezh and the Don. Well-developed field positions, bunkers and extensive trench systems were everywhere. Only meters separated us from the hooded heads of the field posts. Again, several heavy howitzer batteries were in position. As if on cue, the fire of countless machine guns and light anti-aircraft guns poured down on us from all sides. The bands of flares and smoke tracer ammunition intersected in an adventurous dance of lights. The fire was too high, our luck. Otherwise we would never have escaped this cauldron. Another range of hills, then the broad, shining ribbon of the Don. For a moment, dense clouds over the river ice obscured us from the defenses, then we stormed up the west bank. Again a hail of machine-gun fire, again trenches and barbed wire entanglements. Perhaps a hundred meters of no man's land, then waving Landsers in snow-covered trenches. It was done. A look at the map. The position entered, checking the course.

"Pull up, the magic's about to start!"

We stared spellbound at the ghostly scenery. The snowfields stretched out in front of us for another 10 or 15 kilometers, then the world seemed to come

to an end. Fantastic towers of clouds rose sky-high and pushed towards us at breakneck speed, like an impenetrable white wall. We searched desperately for a gap. Like titans, the bizarre formations rolled towards us on dark, almost black storm waves. Reaching far ahead, yellow-grey snow clouds billowed out from under the monsters as if they wanted to suffocate all life beneath them. There was no escape now. Lord God, help!

I switched on the channel:

"Elbe from Berta-Kurfürst, front flown over. Plan square ET 95, weather warning understood. Try to get through to the field."

"Berta-Kurfürst, you've understood. Chief's instructions: try a belly landing. Visibility at the site less than 50 m. Wind speeds up to 100 km/h."

The white spray of the icy surf pushed over the flat hills in front of us. None of us had ever seen such a spectacle. Hein sat pale with his lips pressed together behind the stick. Tense to the extreme, he waited for his first encounter with the monster. Werner's eyes were fixed questioningly on me:

"Can we do this, Schorsch?"

"We have to make it. Buckle up."

Hein rumbled off:

"Do you even know where we are? Now show us what you know about navigation."

I recalculated the course again. The "Knemeyer" rotated. The pencil flew over the reporting block. Number followed number, then the windward angle was fixed. I hastily transferred the calculated course to the chart. I calculated another probability. Done.

Old Erdmann, my math teacher, would have been delighted with me. He didn't often get to do that at school. Strangely enough, I enjoyed math, I was fascinated by playing with numbers. Few subjects had fascinated me so much. But when I had to write a school assignment or an "ex", I became restless, often even the beginning wasn't right. Time rushed by and the result was accordingly. In the lower grades, I often shed bitter tears over this. If I tried again at home, it worked like clockwork.

Only one of my teachers really understood this, Professor Rueß, the "cock", as we mocked him because of his strutting gait.

"Why are you so excited, you don't need to be," his voice came down to me warmly. "You can do it, just stay calm!"

As if he had hypnotized me, I suddenly regained my self-confidence. My performance improved noticeably.

I checked the instruments and fastened my seatbelt. Although the snowstorm could kill us in a few seconds, I felt a deep sense of calm.

My comrades often said they couldn't make heads or tails of me. One side of me was that of a warm-hearted, helpful comrade, the other that of a tough, ruthless go-getter. If I could have asked myself these questions, I would certainly have answered the latter in the negative. I knew myself too well. I wasn't a daredevil, but I was able to switch off the environment in the face of danger.

Helmut Witte once said to me:

"If I didn't know you so well, people might be afraid of you. You become a different person on the plane."

The glider pilot in me had awoken.

"Course 250°. Try to dive in at the top of the snow roll, from there we have an updraft."

Hein managed to lift the machine to exactly this level, then a giant fist grabbed us. I involuntarily ducked down. The cold seemed to penetrate every crevice. The engines howled. The plane shook and trembled as if it was going to break at any moment. You could barely see the tips of the wings. The windshields were covered with an impenetrable layer of snow.

"Bloody laundry room," grumbled Hein.

Our eyes never left the instruments. My ears cracked. We were swept upwards like in an elevator. The altimeter seemed to be going crazy: 800 m, 1000 m, 1500 m, 2000 m. The turn indicator danced, the "horizon" rocked as if we were a ship in heavy seas. My eyes remained glued to the compass. Every extreme course deviation had to be corrected immediately. Whole avalanches of snow rushed past outside. Seconds became minutes, minutes seemed like hours. We were still climbing. The danger of icing grew menacingly. As if the elevator had reached its floor, the machine suddenly came to a standstill, then went down again just as abruptly. We had reached the back of the storm roll.

The ground radio station at VII AK responded:

"Berta-Kurfürst von Oder, we hear you NO. Do you understand?"

"Thank you Or, I understand."

The course was therefore correct. My ears began to howl and rattle. We almost had to fall. The white around us gave way to a ghostly gray-black veil. I stared ahead to the right: trees, bushes, a road.

I cried out:

"Damn it, pull up the mill or we'll crash into a forest!" "I see," Hein replied,

"adjust the altimeter." I adjusted according to the estimated altitude. Hein had thrown the machine to the left. I looked behind. Werner shrugged his shoulders questioningly. What was I supposed to say? -

In this weather, an emergency landing among the hilly terrain meant almost certain death; a senseless death, as it seemed to us. Aimlessly hurtling into uncertainty, bursting against trees, burning up in a fiery maelstrom, that was no soldier's death. Hit by countless bullets, after a hard fight in the air, torn to shreds by grenades, that could happen one day, we expected it.

Failure of the "weathermen"? Perhaps! But the Russian winter had its pitfalls. In it, all technology failed, only the mere human being counted. Tank tracks tore apart in the icy mire, petrol turned to gelatine, oil to viscous sludge. The vehicle batteries disintegrated overnight.

The thick curtain tore open and visibility improved for a brief moment. Below us, between avenue trees, the furrows of a road. We must have been almost 100 meters up.

Almost simultaneously, Hein and I shouted: "A railroad track!"

As soon as I recognized it, the railroad line had disappeared again. A glance at the map and compass. It could only have been the Kastornoje - Voronezh line. There was no other line for miles around.

"Everything's fine, we're on the right track, heading 270°."

Werner sighed audibly:

"If we can do this, I'll buy you a drink."

The snowstorm seemed to have abated somewhat. Visibility improved somewhat. The poor blind flying characteristics of the FW 189 became particularly apparent during these minutes. The aircraft was difficult to keep on course. The radio equipment was inadequate. The PeilG 4, a homing device, still had considerable deficiencies. The slightest geomagnetic changes affected the display. Acoustic and optical displays were therefore constantly going crazy at a distance of more than 50 km from the field. We could only rely on the device to a limited extent and had to use the tried and tested dead reckoning system. I did the math again. The first onslaught had undoubtedly been at a higher wind speed than had been reported. 120 km/h was closer to the correct measurement. So another correction.

The front windows of the cockpit were as if they were glued shut. Unimaginable masses of snow drifted by outside, thank God the leading edge of the wings remained free. Still above and below, left and right, nothing but snow. Every now and then, gray shadows flitted below us. Time seemed to be

racing. My blood froze in my veins: the red warning light came on. There was still 15 minutes of fuel left in the tanks. Werner had also seen the light. The tension was unbearable. Werner came forward to us and leaned against the radio. If we didn't reach the spot, we would have to go down at random, then God have mercy on us!

I checked the course again. It couldn't be more than 20 km to the course.

Finally a call from the ground office:

"Berta-Kurfürst von Elbe, come in, please."

The radio operator's voice boomed almost too loudly from the headphones.

"Elbe from Berta-Kurfürst, we have no ground visibility. Fuel for 12 minutes. Altitude over ground approx. 200 m. Request wind direction and strength at the field."

"Berta-Kurfürst, visibility between 50-100 m, snow showers, gusty wind from 270-280°, attempted belly landing."

"Elbe, we understand, thank you, over."

Again, all connections to the environment were severed, again we were alone in this icy inferno. The plane was tossed around like a bird of prey, in danger of crashing to the ground at any moment. There was still a tiny glimmer of light on the horizon, even though the fate of my comrades was very clear to me.

A crew from a neighboring squadron had been reported missing after one of the heavy snowstorms of the previous days. The search was unsuccessful as the presumed crash site was not even approximately known. The next day or the day after, a Russian farmer came to the field airfield, faithfully took off his cap and reported that he had found an airplane about two hours' drive away while logging. The plane had already been snowed in, but he could tell that it was a German plane. There was no life left. After the old man had been rewarded with salt, bread and vodka, a search party set off immediately. The crash site presented a gruesome picture. A deep swathe had been torn through the forest, at the end of which lay the wreckage. The crew were trapped in the cockpit, dead, crushed, torn and frozen to ice, covered in the shroud of this merciless winter.

Again, indefinable dark shadows flitted away beneath us. A glimmer of hope, no more. Another course check, watch comparison, instrument check. The pointer of the PeilG 4 had set itself firmly, it only oscillated slightly. The acoustic display was clear and without background noise. We must now be

directly on course for the approach.

"Four more minutes and we'll be at the square."

"I hope you're right," Hein said skeptically.

Involuntarily, I began to organize my documents, as if a smooth landing was already a foregone conclusion. A glance at the stopwatch, another 8-10 minutes of fuel, then "the oven was off", as Werner used to say.

"Elbe von Berta-Kurfürst, come in, please."

"Berta-Kurfürst, come in, please."

"Elbe, we'll be at the site in a few minutes, please set up listening posts."

"Will do, fingers crossed."

Hopefully that would help. Despite the proximity of the course, the pointer of the PeilG 4 began to oscillate again, although the compass hardly showed any course deviations.

The storm was still shaking our bird, whipping the propellers through clouds of snow. An almost stoic fatalism had taken hold of me. If it had to be done, it had to be done. It could no longer be changed. If we didn't make it, if this was to be our last flight, then it would be like countless others before us. Our comrades would pack our things tomorrow and separate our flying equipment from our clothing and personal belongings. The "chamber cop" would stand next to it with the clothing certificate and check it off:

"2 cloth pants, 2 aviator blouses, 1 cloth coat, 1 pair of lace-up shoes, 1 pair of boots, etc., etc."

Another would open the wallet and pick up the purse:

"250 credit marks, 1 postal savings book, letters and pictures of relatives."

An often experienced, tragic spectacle during many years of war. You will then pack everything up and send it to your relatives. They will shed tears over it until it too has become a memory.

We will not be judged by the weaknesses and strengths of the present, but by the fullness of the memory of which we were worthy. When the song "Ich hatt' einen Kameraden" (I had a comrade) will resonate in the memory of the coming peace, then it really was worth living, then alone did it have meaning. Then sharp contours would remain, not just the vague shadows of a forgotten existence.

"Berta-Kurfürst von Elbe, we can hear you at 120°," the hoarse voice of the ground radio operator sounded from the headphones.

"Now 180°, turn north."

"Elbe, understood, stay on reception."

Werner had come even further forward and pushed himself between the pilot's and observer's seats. Six eyes were now staring at the white wall in front of us. They were watering from overexertion from the futile attempts to make out even a small spot of color somewhere down there and to penetrate the snow in front of the icy windows.

"Berta-Kurfürst, they're getting closer. We can hear you at 200°."

"Now you're just west of the square."

"Elbe, got it, don't have the slightest visibility."

In this snowstorm, distances were of little use. As in rain showers, the sound in snow clouds also spread out widely. This could simulate distances that deviated considerably from reality.

No matter how much I leaned forward and pressed my forehead against the windows, nothing was visible. It was maddening.

"Hein, sink slowly!"

I knew it would be difficult to gain even a few meters of height in this storm. One gust after another shook us to the core.

"Elbe, we're trying to get ground visibility."

Slowly, the needle of the altimeter dropped. Still no visibility. Our situation was becoming more and more threatening, as there were some hills to the north of the square.

"Berta-Kurfürst, we can hear you at 270°."

Hein carefully turned the machine into a flat curve. A routine maneuver in everyday life, but now one that demanded the utmost attention. If a squall got under the wing, we could be pushed to the ground in a flash.

"Berta-Kurfürst, you're getting closer again, now at 300°".

"Now engine noise on the northern edge of the square."

The radio operator's voice echoed the excitement downstairs. It was almost overflowing. He forgot to turn off the transmitter so that we could hear part of the conversation. Several pilots had to stand by the radio truck. As so often, the radio operator's voice was the only connection, the only sign of life and compassion in the burning sky. Although you didn't get very close to a reconnaissance squadron in the hustle and bustle of everyday life at the front, this voice was more than a news link, it gave hope and confidence. This man always found time for friendly words, even in the short form of a military message. Sometimes admonishing, sometimes cheering, sometimes reassuring, sometimes angry; that's how he became part of our team, part of our flying existence. It was impossible to imagine him out of the noise of the

headphones. He lived among us, although he rarely left the radio car. The excitement of aerial combat gripped him just like it did us. If his voice no longer reached us, it was the rapid succession of Morse code characters that he sent out into the ether in an endless rhythm with the key and which unmistakably bore his mark. We were so in tune with each other that Fritz K. always reported for duty when we were in the air.

I will never forget when, in the excitement of a dogfight - attacked and chased by four or five Iwans, surrounded by a whirl of red stars, like the virtuoso tricks of a juggler - I made a report in a voice that was almost overflowing. Suddenly his voice rang out from the headphones:

"Always take it easy and have a good cigar. Why wet your pants when the 'glasses' are so close."

We all laughed, laughing at the wild hunters curving around us. We pulled the plane up into a steep turn, rolled to the downswing and we were gone, saved once again. Saved, no doubt, by the familiarity of the reassuring voice of this man who fought with us and yet rarely heard the bullets whistle or the impacts crash himself. He was right to say that when he put his headphones away after a successful reconnaissance mission:

"Well, how did we do that again?"

It was the "we" that gave him this right, without which many things would have been worthless and pointless.

"Carefully further down!"

My eyes were burning ever more intensely and threatened to fail in the face of the whirlwind of flakes still chasing away below us; already overwhelmed by the exertions of the hours-long wintry hostile flight, first in the fading shadows of the night, then by the burning rays of the morning sun.

"Berta-Kurfürst, you are now above the village, at 30°."

Hein pressed the button again. There was still nothing to see, the view still barely reached the tips of the surfaces, even though we thought a few times that more shadows were appearing in the monotonous white.

I involuntarily threw my upper body back in shock. A few meters below the machine, the golden domes of a church flashed past. Ten meters lower and we would have been torn to shreds, but now they appeared to us as saving buoys in this wildly whipped sea of snow.

The church stood on a flat hill to the north of the village. With its shining domes, it did not fit in at all with the simple and often poor houses and huts of the village, but it was a showpiece of Eastern Orthodoxy. The impressive exterior was deceptive. The unadorned interior had housed an agricultural

storehouse for many years. A strange earmarking of materialistic attitudes.

"Elbe from Berta-Kurfürst, have just flown over the church, are descending to 60° and are attempting to land. Sanka and fire department stand by."

"Already done, Berta-Kurfürst."

My heart felt a little lighter. I had proved to my comrades that I could navigate even under the most extreme conditions.

"I would never have believed that you could get to the spot so precisely with dead reckoning alone," Werner said.

His words somehow did me good and I was proud to have received this small token of appreciation.

"Hein, now it's your turn."

Nothing was possible with the usual blind landing procedures. We were not equipped for either the ZZ procedure or the Knickebein-Elektra. The only thing that helped here was enormous flying experience, and Hein had that. That's why I was completely calm.

"Berta-Kurfürst, we can hear you now 60°, visibility has improved, try to come down quickly. We'll switch on the runway lighting."

That was easier said than done. Hein had tacked far to the east, we were probably 2-3 km from the course. With the necessary caution, he turned into the wind. According to the acoustic display, we were exactly on course again. We only had a few minutes left. The plane descended meter by meter.

The shadows below us took on sharper outlines. Trees, houses, a road. A jerk and the landing gear was out. The landing flaps followed. Height above ground maybe 50 meters. Werner slid backwards and fastened his seatbelt.

Hein opened the small window on the entrance flap, which gave him a slightly better view, although whole clouds of snow were blown into the interior. I pressed my nose against one of the side windows.

"A few dots of light to the right, the runway. Move a little to the right."

He reacted immediately. I was blind again.

"Now I can see the headlights too."

"Then we're too far to the right."

I strained to see any details down to the right that could have helped us. The roofs of the blocks of flats appeared in front of the engine on the right. I was about to feel sick, we were already level with the barracks.

"Damn, we missed the runway!"

"Berta-Kurfürst, you're above the square, but too high."

No wonder, a real "laundry room" was still a flying pleasure compared to what was going on out there. The storm had hit us from the side and pushed us away more than was desirable.

"Elbe, we're trying a new approach."

"Understood, but hurry, a new snow roller is approaching."

Now we were getting nervous. The tension was unbearable. All three of us huddled in our seats, pale and with burning eyes.

Hein threw the plane back just above the treetops in a daring turn. Once again, the storm tried to grab us under the wings. Our plane drifted off at an incredible speed like a petrel.

"The storm seems to have calmed down a bit after all," Werner said in a grumbling voice that was more an expression of hope than conviction.

"Come on, buckle up again," Hein told us. No need, because we were all hanging nicely in our belts.

As we turned in the opposite direction, it began to howl and roar in the cockpit. Once again, the winter storm was trying to get us in its icy clutches.

Hein reached to his right.

"Flaps out, landing gear out."

The indicator lamps lit up. The "nose" rose. Hein immediately pushed on and kept the plane firmly on course. Like a mountaineer carefully feeling his way from handhold to handhold on a wintry rock face, we now felt our way meter by meter towards the runway.

Close in front of the crosshairs of the bomb sight was a group of large trees. I knew them.

"We are slightly to the left of the approach direction. Altitude 40-50 m."

He let the "Mühle" slip a little, an adventurous maneuver in this weather. It could lead to a stall. Short throttle input, a small dip on the left wing. A few meters above the ground, we were back in a normal flying position.

Not much could go wrong now. Barely fifty meters ahead of us, the first lights of the runway lighting system shone through the snow flurries. Hein had also recognized them, although the lights were repeatedly covered by swathes of snow. It could be enough for a landing.

He pressed the machine low to the ground, intercepted it again briefly and then headed straight for the middle of the street of lights at high speed.

"The runway, the runway!" I shouted in great excitement. Looking only at the lights flying past him from the side, with no view ahead, Hein started to land. The tail wheel on the tail unit grabbed first. The tail boomed. Throttle away. The propellers whipped huge clouds of snow backwards. We quickly lost speed. The landing gear plowed into the soft snow. The "mill" threatened

to turn upside down. He had pressed the stick tightly against the belly so that the airflow pressed the tail unit into the snow. To our left and right, the lights of the beacon whizzed past. They gave us an idea of the path we couldn't see. We were pushed forward and the machine sank into the snow for good. The strong braking effect pressed us into the belts. If he had pressed on the brakes now, we would have rolled over. Our brave AK + BK slid and slid. It slowly turned around its vertical axis to the left, but stayed between the lights and didn't break out. Then we were stationary. The engines bucked a little more and then left us to the howling of the snowstorm. The swathes swept almost horizontally across the tarmac. Furious, as if it wanted to pour out all its wrath on us, the storm descended on us. Our bird trembled and shook like a thoroughbred horse after a hard race, but it stood firm.

The tension fell away from us.

"Done, done," we shouted at each other. I threw off the parachute and harness straps. Cold sweat broke out of my body. Total exhaustion threatened to take possession of me. I had ripped open the hatch and got a load of snow in my face. Just get out, get out into the biting snow wind, into the raging storm. I couldn't find my footing on the surface and tumbled into the knee-deep snow. The icy cold froze the sweat in the pores of my face and the air around my mouth and nose into white crystals, but I paid no attention to the cold. The fact that I felt it, that we had all survived this circus from hell, that alone seemed important to me. I trudged backwards and tried to turn the tail into the wind. It was a futile endeavor, a broad snow bank had formed on the tail wheel in a matter of seconds. Again and again, the wind managed to lift the aircraft over the right wing. Even turning the rudder all the way in was no use, the bird could no longer be brought out of its position. I listened up. The howling of the storm was drowned out by the low hum of a diesel engine. At first just a shadow, the vehicle emerged from the snow in front of us, accompanied by the rattling of the chains, like a battle tank.

It was our tractor, a looted vehicle from Soviet army stocks. It used to serve as an ammunition and show-off vehicle for heavy howitzers. An excellent and indestructible vehicle. Legend had it that the robust multi-fuel engine could even be run on lubricating oil. We hadn't tried it yet because we were afraid of ruining the engine. As one of the  
When the doors swung open, Karl, our waiter, jumped down, wearing a deep mask. A mechanic followed.

"That's it, you've done well," he also shouted and threw his arms around my neck. He grabbed me by both shoulders and we did a great dance.

"You did a great job," he kept repeating. His eyes shone with genuine joy.

Tears ran down our faces and turned to ice. Witnesses to the fact that even the harshness of war could preserve a soft heart in men. Only this small glint between the narrow slits of his woollen cap gave us a hint of what otherwise only a man's whole face can express: honest joy, but also pride. The master's pride in his work, in his work. Yes, it was also his work. It was not a multitude of individual achievements running side by side, it was a joint effort. The work of many hands, many eyes, subordinated to a common will.

Who is going to ask about the stones when they see the cathedral? Who will hear the sound of a pipe when they hear the sound of an organ? We had done it. The work was ours, and it was well done. The foreman, the maintenance man, the mechanics, the weapons operator, the radio mechanic, the parachute operator, the fuel attendant, the radio operator, they had all fought with us.

"Your ears are turning white," Karl called to me, "rub them in quickly."

I had taken off my headgear without thinking. My ears were numb. Before I knew it, he took his hands full of snow and pressed them against my ears. Not tolerating any objections, he pulled the FT hood back over my head. My ears began to burn like hell.

"Get in the tugboat, Mr. Lieutenant, you're better off there."

The driver positioned the vehicle directly in front of the cockpit. Together with the mechanic, Karl attached two tow ropes to the suspension struts. Karl came in and the mechanic climbed into the back of the vehicle. It was pleasantly warm in the cab of the tractor. The engine, installed between the seats, acted like a stove. It hummed to itself as if it was really enjoying itself in this cold. It was indeed a vehicle that we lacked not only in the air force, but much more, it seemed to me, in the army. We had assembled the tugs from several looted vehicles, based on a model that had fallen into our hands undamaged. For over a year now, they had accompanied the squadron's mission, in the dust of the summer advance, in the mud of the fall, in the snowstorms of this winter.

Through the small rear window I could see the indistinct outline of Hein behind the control stick. Werner had taken my seat. We approached the half-destroyed accommodation buildings, then the small halls. As if the weather gods had lost interest in the game, the storm also abated somewhat, or was it the protective shield provided by the tall buildings?

Like wasps at the entrance to their nest, many comrades stood by the small door in the hall. Captain Berthold and First Lieutenant Mauser were also there. The joy on everyone's faces eased the tension they had endured with us during the long minutes of danger. As soon as the plane was stationary, Hein

and Werner jumped down with their parachutes on their backs.

"You've done well," Berthold smiled at us, "we'll have to raise a glass for that first."

Lieutenant Mauser squeezed both my hands. I understood him too, the warm-hearted Austrian. They didn't even wait for a report. They knew that I hadn't had enough breath yet.

The hall doors banged open. Once again, steam billowed out from under the semicircle of the roof, torn away by the storm in long, white sheets. A dozen men pushed the plane into the hangar. The doors closed.

Our bird looked strangely alien in the twilight of the hangar. The plane stood frosty and forbidding, as if unwilling to allow itself to be pushed back into the icy storm.

The picture equipment attendant climbed into the cockpit, removed the cassette and covered the equipment. Karl handed me my map board and the message pad, carefully handed me the parachute so that the pack wouldn't be damaged, then we trudged back the way we had come before in the fading night. Words of encouragement flew over to us and repeatedly broke through the wall that the howling of the storm had built up around us. Slowly, the blood began to make its way back. I was freezing miserably despite the thick combination. In the parachute keeper's shed, we were warm and cozy. We laid our umbrellas next to each other on the large table he needed for his work. He brushed off the snow and put them in the bags marked with our names, carefully and cautiously, as befitted the precious silk they held inside.

"Everything's all right, Lieutenant," he called to me, indicating that his inspection had been satisfactory.

We laboriously made our way through the waist-deep snow to the command post. Winter had cast its spell over us again. Snow stuck to our goggles, and ice flowers formed on the lenses. Our sweat-soaked shirts began to freeze. My ears were burning like fire. I wrapped the aviator scarf tightly around my head to prevent the worst from happening. Everyone silently reflected on the past hours. How easily they could have been the last hours of our lives. What have we done? What could we have done better? No matter how many questions we asked ourselves, there was nothing we could do to change what had happened.

The command post was a flat, barrack-like building. Presumably the non-commissioned officers' quarters of the former Soviet air base. Cold, insufficiently insulated, thin outer walls, barely heatable. You froze in their walls if the stove wasn't constantly glowing. It was inconceivable to us that the former residents were such hardened fellows and did not feel the

shortcomings of these buildings as we did.

Having finally escaped the frost, the few degrees above zero in the storage room seemed pleasantly warm. On the walls were maps of all scales of the front sections we had flown over. On the map table were aerial maps and aerial photographs that the squadron had recently flown. The names of almost all the squadron's observers could be read on the legends: Olt. Metzner, Olt. Mauser, Olt. Wolf, Olt. Bendig, Ofw. Beck, Lt. Gerth, Lt. Sickert etc. On the map, one tactical sign followed another, reflecting the sum of the knowledge we had recently gained.

Captain Berthold stood up from the map table. Lieutenant Mauser was still on the phone to one of the air liaison officers, who couldn't wait for our report. Berthold had an amiable disposition, sometimes exuberantly cheerful, then again with a serious, sad expression around his mouth and eyes. A true Saxon by nature: extremely hard-working. A law student in his final semesters, he was drafted as a reserve officer at the beginning of the war. At the beginning of the war, he wore the field gray of the army with the red piping of an artilleryman; only later did he join aerial reconnaissance. He was not the ideal "squadron commander", as he lacked the final commitment to flying, but he was a real superior. Even when reprimanded, he immediately found a unifying word that led to rapid oblivion. He claimed no right for himself that he would not have granted to the last Landser. With his great knowledge of human nature, he had less of a "rough shell" than a very thick skin. All in all, he knew his fellow countrymen.

"Crew reporting back from enemy flight, Captain!" He slowly came around the table. His eyes wandered from one to the other, then he shook my hand.

"To be honest, I didn't give a damn about you," he said dryly. "That was an aeronautical feat that no one will be able to match in a hurry. In this snowstorm, a successful belly landing behind the front line would have been worthy of recognition, but to fly to within a few hundred meters of the field and then make a normal landing - without breaking - hats off!"

Slowly, he poured the brandy, which was always in stock, into five glasses, for which the name cognac would certainly have been a term of endearment.

He raised his glass.

"To your health! The main thing is that I have you back in good health."

"To your health, Captain," came as if from a single mouth. The hot stuff ran down his throat, burning.

"Now get out of your clothes and get to work. The army and the corps are already waiting for your report. There seems to be a lot going on over there".

We took off our heavy fur combinations in the next room. Pale and visibly shaken, we sat down around the card table.

While I transferred all the observations onto the map with the help of Olt. Mauser, I dictated my report to the command post recorder. A clearer and clearer picture of the situation emerged, which made us realize the seriousness of the situation for the first time. I thought about the result. It seemed incomprehensible to me that the 2nd Army had not initiated any measures to enable the VII AK to withdraw from the Voronezh area in good time. Above all, I thought it was important to get the enormous quantities of ammunition and supplies that were still in rear depots to safety.

Berthold had also become thoughtful:

"What is your impression of the situation?"

We reconnaissance pilots had become accustomed to thinking for ourselves about military developments. The burden of responsibility associated with these flights was often heavy enough for us. But this responsibility, this constant processing of a multitude of new insights, broadened our view of the big picture of military events to an extent that many officers in the middle command were probably never able to achieve.

Never again would I have traded places with the fighters covered in fame, not with the glory of the Stukas and bombers, the knowledge of things was stronger.

"Captain, I don't want to look at today's flight in isolation, but add two flights to it, the flight into the small Don arc and the flight into the Liwny area. This is the only way to confirm a suspicion I've had for days:

1. The mass of incoming reserves and supplies is rolling to the interface between the 2nd Army and the 4th Army. We have detected strong artillery masses south of Liwny and the deployment of strong motorized and armoured units in front of the left wing of the XIII AK.

2. The analysis of aerial photographs of the bridgehead at Pervoye-Storoshevoye-Selyavoye and east of it in the area of Davidovka and Svoboda showed that the Red Army was pumping strong forces into this area. If we had only relied on our eyes, we would probably still believe that there was nothing to fear from there. The Soviet 40th Army masses its forces in front of the left wing of the 2nd Hungarian Army.

3. The result of today's flight fits exactly into this picture. The reserves, which are brought in on the railroad lines coming from the NE, as well as the mass of supplies, are marching west to the XIII AK. The unloadings in the

Voronezh area are mainly supply transports.

If you ask me how the situation will develop, the answer is easy to find:

The enemy will first try to press the front near the Hungarians in order to build on the successes already achieved against the Italians. Main thrust direction Ostrogoshk. Attacking from the Pervoye-Storoshevoye bridgehead, he will try to gain the Kastornoje and Osedschy areas. An attack against the left wing of the XIII AK will follow in order to pinch the 2nd Army and unhinge the VII AK, if necessary encircling it. The Voronezh Front and Ukrainian Front will then attempt to take Kursk and Kharkov in a rapid advance to the west."

Berthold looked at me thoughtfully and raised his shoulders:

"You could be right. But then why the heavy anti-aircraft massing around Voronezh? The divisions of the VII AK report that the trenches over there are filling up more and more. Don't you think that the 60th Army is more likely to try to take Voronezh?"

"Here I may contradict you, Captain. I am convinced that the anti-aircraft protection serves exclusively to secure the Mishurinsk-Voronezh-Liski railroad line, which is extremely important for the enemy. Everything else is just deception and distraction."

"We want to see. Thank you very much for today."

Endlessly tired, we picked up our equipment and walked over to our bunker. Exhausted, I threw myself onto my straw bag. We had survived another battle, but we had only narrowly escaped the white death.

The longing for home never left me, not even in my dreams. I saw myself transported back to one of the summer days of 1930. As best I could at the age of ten, I helped my father with the logging. It was more of a gimmick, what I could contribute. For me, the forest seemed full of secrets to be explored. The spicy scent of resin mingled with the cool freshness of the moss covered in glistening veils and the tart breath of the large ferns. Overcast by the sun, I saw the

The clearing in front of me where my father was working. In the twilight darkness, the depths of the forest behind me. Countless voices sounded from it, the bright call of a siskin, the hammering of a woodpecker. I listened attentively to the countless melodies that gave the forest its voice.

Oh no, I didn't need to learn to love the forest. I felt at home in it from childhood. This affection has survived to this day. It carried over to the dark forests of Russia as well as the light deciduous forests of France. I began to look at people according to their forests, because they seemed to me to reflect

their lives. I never felt fear, not the strange anxiety that afflicts some people when they step out of the bright light of wide meadows into a dark forest. Many of my comrades suspected the worst when I often roamed nearby woods alone. My eyes and ears were so keenly aware of what was going on there that hardly anyone would have succeeded in luring me into an ambush. Even in Russia, the forest meant home to me. People who lived in such forests could not be evil.

As a small boy, I could lie for hours in front of the huge piles of large wood ants and watch their bustling activity, secretly sensing how similar the orders of all living creatures were. I slowly stalked the grazing deer in the clearings at the edges of the large moors of my homeland. Filled with adventurous dreams. It wasn't the desire to hunt that drove me, no, I just wanted to look. I crept cautiously to the large fox dens and watched the young foxes at their exuberant play. Satisfied and happy when I once again managed to get within a few meters of them without them noticing me.

After the work was done, my father took a break at the edge of the forest. There was a small chapel hidden under the last trees in the forest: the "Fliegerkapelle". It had been erected in memory of the crew of an airplane that had crashed to death here towards the end of the First World War.

Quietly and thoughtfully, I sat down on the bench next to my father.

"Father, have you ever flown before?"

"No, bub. I'd love to fly, but it's too expensive." "How expensive is it?"

"I don't know, but the hour must cost around 30 marks." "What, thirty marks?" I exclaimed in horror.

Thirty marks was an unimaginably high amount for me at the time; it was many times the school fees that my father had to pay to enable me to attend the Oberrealschule.

"Flying is not for us, bub. That remains a dream. Get that out of your head. Who's going to pay for the expensive training?"

My defiant head reared up:

"Father, I want to be an aviator."

My father looked at me for a long time. A soft laugh flew over his furrowed face, from which such good eyes shone.

"You've got the stubbornness for it. Maybe you can do it. It probably won't be easy for you. But if you think so, go for it."

My eyes wandered up to the clouds. Over there, high above a farm near

Fürstätt, a hawk was flying its tight circles. It was excitingly beautiful to watch this bird. You could see its wingtips tremble when it spotted prey. From a tight circle, it would fly in a wide figure eight. Sometimes making steep turns, then sweeping wide again, it scanned the area. Suddenly it reared up briefly, its wings fluttering excitedly. It shrank to a point, and this point dropped like a stone into the depths, charging towards an invisible prey. I jumped up with excitement. Maybe I could see what was happening over there on the slope. Before I was even up there, I saw it pull up again and fly towards the edge of the forest with powerful wing beats. I clearly recognized the prey in its talons.

The destination of my dream wandered again. The restless activity at our station cast a spell over me. The coming and going of countless travelers, the hustle and bustle of freight traffic, the speed of the express trains thundering through the station - all this was something that could well impress a small, dreamy boy. There was life here, the world opened up into infinite, barely imaginable expanses. There was a lot to see and even more to hear, and I saw and heard.

There was that evening again. The rain lashed through the streets. I had to take my father's dinner to the station in a dinner set, as was often seen in those days. He didn't have enough time between the arrival and departure of his trains to have a small meal in the restaurant or even go home. In the on-call room, a tall man, a colleague of my father's, received me in a very friendly manner. He took off my coat and hung it up to dry, then put the dishes on the edge of the stove to warm them up again. I looked curiously at the sparse furnishings in the room. After an endless wait, my father arrived. He sat down at the table and calmly ate his meal, asking how his mother was, while his colleague went back out onto the platform.

"Do you know who my comrade here is?"

"No, father!"

"His name is Pörer-Emden. Even during the war, the Emperor decreed by law that all men who belonged to the crew of the cruiser 'Emden' could carry the surname 'Emden' for life, so brave were these sailors. When their ship sank somewhere in the Far East, they made their way to Arabia on a Chinese boat and marched right through the English lines to the German front in Turkey. There they reported back to a general."

Nothing impressed me more in my young life when I was able to listen to the tales of this man, who was normally taciturn, a short time later. Even

today I still draw inspiration from the heroism of these men, an example for generations of a sense of duty, sacrifice and loyalty. A sense of duty that these soldiers also transferred to their later civilian careers and that made them so indispensable in every human and state order.

That Whitsun day in 1928 kept haunting my dreams. My mother and I were waiting at the beautifully laid lunch table for my father, who - how rare it was - was supposed to be off duty from midday. But lunch had to be cooked once or more, and my father didn't come. Once again we were left alone. It became afternoon and evening. My mother patiently said that my father had probably once again volunteered to stand in for a comrade who was ill. Then, when it was already dark, came the news that terrified my mother and made me feel for the first time all the worry that I was now experiencing often enough during the war. Now it was for a comrade, but back then it was for my father.

Suddenly the doorbell rang. A railwayman in uniform stood in the semi-darkness of the stairwell, turning his cap in his hand in embarrassment:

"There was a serious rail accident at Munich East station this morning; there are said to have been around 50 fatalities. We haven't heard from your husband yet. Tell him to come to the station."

My mother's face turned white as snow. Barely recovered from a serious illness, this news seemed to be the last straw for her. I could hardly believe this premonition of a terrible fate. I clung to my mother in fear. My father should no longer be alive, no, that was not, could not be. My mother hurriedly got dressed. I hurriedly slipped into my jacket and shoes. That night was endless, interrupted again and again by my mother's anxious questions. I think it was the first night of my life that I spent sleepless.

Finally, at dawn the next day, certainty came. My father was alive. He had been thrown out of one of the carriages when the train from Mühldorf hit his train and was lying in a hospital in Munich with serious, but not life-threatening injuries. He was expected to be discharged in a few days.

Mother and I drove to Munich in the morning. My father was quite lively again, even if his face was miserably bruised. Later, everything else seemed unimportant to me: the lengthy investigations into the circumstances of the accident, the nerve-racking interrogations that my father had to undergo again and again, the days-long hearings at the Munich District Court. My father was alive, everything else was curable and had to be endured.

In later years, I often asked myself where my father got the inner peace and contentment that made him a cheerful person despite what he had experienced. Now I knew. It was the deep knowledge of the essence of all

things, of the fundamentals of life itself. The realization that even in the feverish sickness of human existence, in war, we came up against the limits of divine omnipotence. It was his ability to relate man to the light years that separated us from infinity. To judge the apparent power of an individual by the impotence with which he too had to surrender to death.

In the second half of January, the battle was in full swing in our sector as well. The Hungarian army had been swept into the maelstrom of the collapse around Stalingrad, hit frontally and in the flank by a heavy attack from the Ukrainian Front. The front was torn open. The VII AK on its southern flank, heavily threatened despite the immediate deployment of Gruppe Siebert, had to evacuate Voronezh. The XIII AK was unable to withstand an attack by massive Soviet forces at the junction with the 4th Army. The entire 2nd Army began to falter.

Tired and exhausted, the crews of our squadron sat down to dinner together. Conversation was slow in coming. Some had flown two or more missions that day and had been over the enemy for 4-6 hours. The field telephone in the command post never stopped ringing. One call for help from the troops followed another. Completely misjudging our task, we were supposed to be bombers, fighters and reconnaissance aircraft at the same time. Without us, they were blind. The situation was desperate.

Battle-hardened, well-equipped Soviet troops were thrown into the fray. The image of the Soviet soldier had also changed psychologically. Whereas in the early autumn of 1942 the harsh brutality of the Red commissars had still dominated the battle, now a clear unity could be seen. The joint determination to defeat us crushingly. We had not only lost the great battle of that winter militarily and politically, we had also lost it spiritually.

The pressure in the air was getting tougher and tougher. There was a Russian fighter group in the Yelets and Lipetsk area that made life very difficult for us. Almost every enemy flight brought fighter contact. New types were appearing in increasing numbers, the La-5, the YAK-9, fast, maneuverable machines. Occasionally also American models. Our FW 189 proved to be increasingly too weak. The situation had deteriorated so quickly that we had to reckon with having to vacate the airfield in the following days, perhaps even hours, under direct enemy pressure. That evening, the chief had sent an advance party to Kursk. On the following day, the squadron was to follow in turn. The ground crew worked feverishly to load the equipment.

After dinner, Hptm. Berthold called all the crews to the command post.

The latest reconnaissance results were discussed and the situation of the divisions explained. Finally, he turned to me:

"You will be the first to move to Kursk East tomorrow morning with two other crews. You will receive further orders there. You will fly all further missions from there."

I repeated the order.

"Captain, our machine has been hit and the oil pump has been damaged. It's very likely that it won't be ready until noon tomorrow because there are no spare parts."

"Good, then you'll get another machine. If your machine doesn't clear, it will be blown up. The other crew will then sit with the rear detachment."

These were great prospects, but we couldn't risk losing such valuable equipment.

As I was about to lie down, I got a call from the group. First Lieutenant Hofmann gave me an order from the commander, Major Stein, to come to the picture station immediately. Despite the late evening hour, it was still very busy there. There were a lot of aerial photographs of the area east of Voronezh on the evaluation table. Two evaluators were sitting behind their room glasses and kept looking at new pairs of images. There was a look of helplessness on their faces. They asked me to take a close look at the area on the southern edge of Bolovoje. I was presented with excellent pictures of brilliant sharpness, taken with an RB 50/30. There were four wagons with their own locomotive. First I tried the thread counter, then the space glasses. One of the wagons had a strangely high superstructure. No

An anti-aircraft gun, not even an e-meter, that was clear. The long shadow next to the car then solved the puzzle. A solution that caused a lot of excitement in the air corps, but was quickly confirmed. The structure was very similar to the antenna of a Freya device, which I had already seen back home. We made a few enlargements as large as the grain of the film would allow. There was no longer any doubt: it was a Soviet radio measuring device. Now the enormous anti-aircraft protection we had experienced and, above all, the outstanding firing performance of the heavy batteries east of Voronezh had found its explanation.

At dawn the following day, I walked over to the lounge, lost in thought. Where one or other of the crew usually sat at breakfast at this time of day, there was a yawning emptiness on this day. The meagre crockery seemed to have already been packed away. Most of them probably helped themselves to

the cooking utensils directly from the field kitchen. In the small room next door, which had previously served as a makeshift kitchen, Anka and Maria broke off their conversation when I entered the room and watched me in silence.

"Good morning, is there anything else?"

"Yes, lieutenant, just take a seat," Maria called out to me.

At that moment I realized that once again I had to say goodbye to a person I had grown fond of in just a few months.

Maria was in her mid-twenties and had been a teacher at the local school until the Red Army withdrew. She was the harsh yet always friendly type of young Russian woman you often met. She spoke surprisingly good German. She was often suspected of working for the "Reds", but nobody could prove it. When we asked for help for our "casino", she and Anka were sent from Starost. We let them run the show, and we got used to being more careful with conversations in their presence. One or two people had certainly tried to "conquer" them, but there was nothing we could do. With the decency typical of the Russian rural population, she very self-confidently fended off all intrusions. She received food for her work, sometimes tea or coffee and salt.

Salt, by the way. It was a treasure here. At first we thought this was only the case during the war because of the insufficient supply for the population. But not at all, even the oldest villagers couldn't remember ever having enough salt. Even if they had enough to eat in peacetime, salt was always in short supply. We took advantage of this to do a lot of bartering in order to improve our own kitchen list.

However, the situation of the population was not only so bad because of the lack of salt, food was also scarce. When they withdrew, the Soviet troops had driven away all the cattle and taken away all the larger food supplies. What remained were old tractors that could barely be harnessed to a sledge. The little food that remained for the population - mostly buried in holes in the ground next to the houses - gradually ran out.

The first occasion for a conversation with Maria was by no means pleasant. As always when I was somewhere new, I spent the first few days wandering around the area on my own to get an idea of the people and their way of life. During one of these walks, I found items of German soldiers' equipment at the edge of a bush behind the last houses in the village: first a belt with a

cartridge pouch, then torn pieces of underwear, a field blouse, a field cap and another belt. While I was picking up the things and examining them carefully, I saw that some villagers were watching me from the houses. As I approached them, an old Ukrainian came over and held out a wallet to me. Stunned, I opened it. It was the wallet of a compatriot, still containing pictures of relatives. I asked him where he had gotten the wallet, to which he replied with the gesture of shooting a rifle:

"Boom, boom."

Assuming it might be the belongings of fallen soldiers, I packed everything up and went back to the command post to have it forwarded to the graves officer in charge. When I told my comrades about my experience, Maria joined in the conversation:

"The things could be from captured German soldiers who were shot in this part of town."

I was speechless with surprise. Now I could also interpret the old man's gesture.

"Where were the soldiers shot?"

"I don't know exactly, Lieutenant. But it must have been in the area where you found the things. That's where they're buried. If you want, I can come with you, I'm sure the residents know where the graves are."

I jumped up in a rage and immediately called the field commandant's office to send someone over. Together with Maria, some men from a burial commando and a captain, we went back to the site. One of the old Ukrainians then accompanied us to a group of trees and showed Maria a place that was not yet completely overgrown but had been leveled.

After just a few digs, the men came across the badly decomposed bodies. One of the dead was only wearing underwear, the other a shirt and cloth trousers. Neither had socks or shoes. They were brought in specially designed bags for identification and a record of the incident was made. The facts were quickly established: they were two German soldiers who had been shot on the spot after being captured. Less than an hour before the Red Army withdrew.

On the way back, when I spoke with great bitterness about such behavior, Maria looked at me with wide eyes:

"It's so much better, Mr. Lieutenant!"

My mouth fell open in surprise.

"What did you say?" I asked again.

"It's better this way. You know, what does captivity mean: beatings, hunger, thirst, torture. Years of hard labor in Siberia. Yes, better dead then."

I couldn't find an answer to this, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Maria was probably right.

From then on, I avoided having political conversations with her, but I quickly realized that I was not only dealing with a passionate patriot, but also a convinced communist.

She enjoyed the trust of the Starost and was often called in as an interpreter. She carried out her task with such a fine sense of tact that even difficult problems were solved to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Around Christmas Eve 1942, I got talking to her about her school, the children, the curriculum, the community and its inhabitants. She willingly gave me information. The following day, she brought pictures of herself with her schoolchildren.

"Strange," she said to me, "you're the first person to take an interest in this."

From that moment on, the connection between us was unbroken.

A few days after the turn of the year, I left the bunker with one of my comrades to go to the sauna, which we had built from tree trunks.

Halfway along the path, Maria came up to me and spoke to me:

"Mr. Lieutenant, Mamushka sends her regards and asks you to come to us tonight or tomorrow evening. She would like to meet you."

My comrade began to blaspheme:

"Egg, look here, something's brewing."

Maria snapped angrily at him:

"I know the lieutenant is married. Has beautiful wife. Won't want to have Russian village teacher!"

It spoke and disappeared.

My companion scratched his head.

"Man, she's got hair on her teeth."

The next evening I set off, with a few little things for the two women in my haversack and of course salt, things I knew were urgently needed. It was a beautiful winter evening. An icy cold breeze drove fine snow down the village street. The small Ukrainian farmhouses barely protruded from the deep snow. Here and there, a small light flashed through the tightly barricaded shutters. What could be on the minds of the people there? The war? Worrying about fathers and brothers on the other side of the front?

Many were probably already lying behind their warming stoves: large monsters made of clay bricks, in which wood or even whole bales of straw

could be burned. There was usually enough space on and behind the stoves to serve as a sleeping place for part of the family in winter. It was warm and cozy there. Children were conceived and born there, the elderly lived and died there. This stove was not just part of their house, it was part of their existence.

Maria and her mother lived in one of the houses at the end of the village. During the day, on my long walks, I had already passed by from time to time, but now, in the darkness of the night, this house looked smaller than it really was. A large snow hood covered the roof. Only a narrow path led through the high snow walls to the street. It was not easy to find your way between the mountains of snow. However, the snow blowing against the houses had an advantage that should not be underestimated: it helped to keep out the bitter cold.

While I was still thinking about which of the loopholes I should try my luck at, a hooded figure approached me.

"Over here, Herr Leutnant," I heard in a guttural, Slavic German. She had been expecting me outside despite the cold.

Maria took off my heavy coat in the anteroom and peeled herself out of her disguise. If I had already had the impression in the semi-darkness of the anteroom that I had stepped into another world, this picture became a wonderful painting whose soothing, muted colors became unforgettable to me when I entered the living room.

I had expected to be let into one of the simple, clean Ukrainian peasant parlors, but here I found a room which, with its pleasant and tasteful furnishings, would certainly have been an ornament to any urban apartment, not only in Ukraine, but anywhere in Europe.

Maria had often told me about her mother. She was obviously very fond of her. But words always remain just words. They can form and pass on thoughts, but they can never replace your own knowledge.

A small, white-haired woman stood in front of me, a real lady, dressed in a spotless white apron. Her hair was tied in a knot at the back of her head. The brightly embroidered blouse made of heavy linen brought to life the unforgettable images of Ukrainian women immortalized by Turgenev in such a unique way. I recognized at once that it was only the simplicity of the rural surroundings that gave the impression of peasantry. This woman's face, marked by suffering, radiated a natural intelligence which suggested that it had been formed by other parents, shaped by a different environment than the simplicity of rural surroundings can produce. She looked at me with strangely clear, dark eyes. The resemblance to Maria was unmistakable.

If mothers always keep a watchful eye on their children's surroundings, these eyes were particularly scrutinizing of me, a foreign soldier. Maria was also wearing a pretty dress, which really showed off her appearance. During the day she had given the impression of a shy and haggard worker, perhaps intentionally, but now a self-confident young woman stood before me, clearly enjoying my surprise at her unexpected surroundings. She was beautiful in an appealing way. In any big city in the rest of Europe she would have attracted attention.

The room was furnished with old and certainly valuable furniture that suggested that its owners had once lived in considerable affluence. Beautiful, colorful carpets, whose actual value I could not estimate, covered the floor and walls. Old copper crockery, with a magnificent samovar on top, gave the room the homely warmth of Russian hospitality.

My astonishment was complete and increased to embarrassment when the old lady greeted me laughing in almost correct German:

"You're still that young, Lieutenant, that's a surprise. Maria described you as a serious, thoughtful young man. We are very pleased that you have come. Please take a seat."

According to Eastern custom, she handed me bread and salt. Almost ashamed, I gave Maria my gifts, which they both accepted with joy. I had already thought I had made a mistake.

"Thank God, Lieutenant, that's very kind of you. It's not just us, the whole village is glad that we have such a decent troop here with you airmen. In general, we can't complain about you Germans so far."

Maria brought a wonderfully fragrant cabbage soup to the table in a tureen made of Tula silver, to which an old embroidered cloth added a festive touch. Good old crockery and remnants of old family silverware created the impression of affluent hospitality. The soft light of two kerosene lamps illuminated the room so that every detail was recognizable.

The soup tasted delicious. What an effort the poor people had made with the little they had.

During the meal, we talked about this and that. When Maria was clearing up, I was finally able to ask the question that had been on the tip of my tongue for a while.

"Ms. Leskow, you speak such excellent German, as if you had lived in Germany for a long time. Where does that come from?"

Mrs. Leskow leaned back in her chair and looked at me blankly for a while,

then a life story began to unroll before me that seemed incomprehensible to me at the time in its highs and lows, in the succession of joys and sorrows, in the concatenation of heartfelt happiness and horrible horrors. Years later, when thousands, even millions of German people were marked by similar fates, I began to understand this woman for the first time.

Mrs. Leskov was born in Minsk. Her parents belonged to what is called "high society". Her father was an officer in the Tsarist army and her mother came from a respected landowner's family. At the age of ten, her parents sent her to a feudal boarding school for girls in St. Petersburg, where there were several German governesses. It was through them that she acquired her first basic knowledge of German. She was barely 17 years old when she and her parents spent a long stay at a health resort in Bad Pyrmont. At 19, she spent some time in Bad Homburg, and at 20, she experienced Paris with her parents. At 21, she married a doctor who had been introduced to the court of the Tsar. The first years of her marriage were the happiest of her life. She gave birth to two sons. But their happiness did not last long. The younger of the sons died unexpectedly from an infectious disease brought in by his father. The world war also cast its shadow over her family. One of her brothers had been killed in action in East Prussia. Her husband became the head of a large military hospital and was only rarely able to look after the family. Maria was born in 1917.

The October Revolution also plunged this family into a sea of misfortune. When the first unrest began in St. Petersburg, her husband had sent her to the countryside with the children. He suspected what was coming. As a doctor, he had kept his ears open in the military hospitals and saw what was coming.

One day she received the unbelievable news that her husband had been murdered. The mob had stormed several houses and immediately shot the doctor when he tried to stop him from committing acts of violence. Horrific scenes must have taken place.

For weeks she was paralyzed, unable to make a decision. With the help of a few loyal servants and household staff, she managed to travel to Peterburg undetected and secure some of her belongings. Months later, the Soviets moved into her village. Together with other women, she was "socialized". When I asked what that meant, Mrs. Leskov replied: "No woman can talk about that!"

As she belonged to the intelligentsia, she was then used for simple agricultural work. This had the advantage that she and her children were able to survive the first two years of famine. Through the mediation of friends, she then got a job as a German teacher in Voronezh in 1921. In 1928 her son

joined the Red Army as a cadet. He was able to distinguish himself at the military academy. By 1937 he was already an officer in the division. There was hope that the wounds inflicted by the revolution would heal. But they were torn open again.

In connection with the G.P.U. investigations ordered by Stalin into the so-called Tukhachevsky affair, her son was also arrested and sentenced to life-long forced labor and exile. She was not admitted to the trial. Despite repeated efforts, she never heard from him again. A released prisoner spread the rumor that her son was in a labor camp on the Arctic Ocean, but he did not know anything specific. The secret police kept quiet.

Maria had to temporarily interrupt her training as a teacher. As the sister of an "enemy of the state", she was not considered suitable for the teaching profession. It was not until 1939 that she was allowed to take her exams again and was offered a job as a school teacher in the village just as the war against Poland began.

What kind of life was that? I had listened, deeply shaken. Maria had sat quietly by and only occasionally added brief comments to her mother's memories.

How these people must have hated!

In the half-shadow of the one kerosene lamp, a beautiful icon sparkled and shone like a precious stone from a corner of the room. A treasure that the two of them had saved through the turmoil of their lives. A masterful combination of outstanding goldsmith work and old Russian miniature painting. The Mother of God with the Child Jesus, symbol of mercy, symbol of security under divine protection and protection.

But wasn't this life anything but love and mercy? Was this life filled only with hatred and bestial cruelty? Wasn't this life that just passed me by, described by the lips of this woman, proof of the defenselessness and helplessness of the individual? What is this human being, created in the image of the Lord and yet as subject to his almighty will as any other living being in this world, who had to obey his will?

While I was still lost in thought looking at the icon, Mrs. Leskow resumed the conversation:

"That was my life, Lieutenant. It has given me many a happy hour, even if there sometimes seemed to be too many hard times. And yet, I am grateful to the Lord God, because he gave me a full life."

What should I say to this?

"I'm still young, maybe that's why I don't understand you, Mrs. Leskov. If I were you, I would hate, nothing but hate!"

"Maybe that's how you Germans think. Maybe that's how you think when you still feel the fire of youth inside you. But if you're Russian, if you're also approaching the evening of life, you think differently.

Well, my husband was killed, my son may have frozen to death somewhere in Siberia long ago, but what does that have to do with 'Mother Russia'? Yes, it is our 'little mother', despite everything and perhaps because of it.

We all love this country. We love its dark forests, its vast steppes. We love the smell of the blood-soaked Russian soil. We love the songs of its people and we love its language. Do you know what deep warmth the Russian is able to give to his words? We love these people, just as they love, but also hate."

I was struggling to get my thoughts in order, such was the confusion that Mrs. Leskov had caused in me. It was time to leave.

"It will probably be years before I can understand you. I will probably remember these hours for the rest of my life. I will always see you as you stand before me at this moment and be grateful for this beautiful evening and your hospitality. The merciful face of the Mother of Jesus on your precious icon will probably never leave me."

A gentle light shone from the kind eyes of this woman.

"Lieutenant, thank you for this evening. Maria has told me about you often enough and I am glad that I was able to get to know you.

Your country has come a long way. I am sure there will still be hard times ahead for you. But if you love your fatherland the way we love Russia, you can never be disappointed by people; then they will no longer ask 'why' at the graves of your comrades."

Maria had brought me my coat and my felt boots. Once again I stood in front of the icon. It seemed incredible to me that an artist could have succeeded in creating an image that was so fascinating. It was a real marvel. I looked once more into the gracious eyes that the painter had given his saint, then I took my leave. According to Russian custom, Mrs. Leskov kissed me on both cheeks.

"You shall live, Mr. Lieutenant!"

A wish that surely came from the bottom of her heart and which also had the bright sound of a bell in the Russian language. Maria shook my hand.

"Soon we will have to say goodbye, Lieutenant.

Perhaps we will never meet again in life. That is why I would like to tell you now that all my wishes are with you and that I will always remember this evening. Thank you for everything you have done for me and therefore for my mother."

I was deeply moved. It's strange how close people often are in life who only had the opportunity to speak to each other in a few contemplative hours. Years later, when I thought back to Maria and her mother, I saw the two women standing in front of me as if I had only said goodbye to them yesterday.

I quickly stepped out into the Russian winter night. It had stopped snowing. The stars twinkled crystal clear in the sky. The Milky Way stretched from one end of the horizon to the other with its glowing nebulae and gave a hint of the limits of our world. I folded up my fur collar and trudged slowly and thoughtfully down the village street to my accommodation, to our bunker. In the distance I heard the rumble of gunfire, lightning flashed across the horizon. Close by, the hum of the engines of a lone airplane. It was war in Russia. -

I thought about all this as I slowly ate my breakfast. Maria leaned against the sideboard and looked at me impassively. The silence was suddenly interrupted by a companion.

"You should come to the hall immediately, your men are waiting for you."

Without another word of farewell, I shook Maria's hand. There was nothing more we could have said to each other.

When we flew in to Kursk airfield, it was as busy as in the days of major combat in the late summer of 1942, with fighter planes, attack aircraft, Stukas, fighters and reconnaissance aircraft all around the tarmac. But if you looked closely, you could sense that the restlessness was very similar to the behavior of a swarm of wild bees that were threatened by danger from somewhere. Nobody really seemed to know how to deal with the enemy. As Berthold said:

"Our situation is desperate, but not hopeless."

The situation changed from hour to hour. Soviet armored units threatened to break the Kastornoje-Shigry road at any moment. On the southern flank of the 2nd Army, armored and rifle divisions advanced on Kharkov.

The Red Army's tactics were clearly visible from the air. A few tanks with mounted infantry, several all-terrain trucks, tractors with attached "Ratsch-Bumm", the dreaded field gun, here and there a "Stalin organ" for the devastating launcher attacks, that was all.

The small battle groups skillfully exploited the weakness of our formations. Once they had found a thin spot, they broke deep into the hinterland and - scurrying around wildly - caused hopeless confusion. In this

way, the Red Army gained a powerful ally: panic.

The cold had become even fiercer in these last days of January 1943, with blizzard after blizzard chasing across the hilly Ukrainian landscape. The squadron barracks were located in a hollow on the northern edge of the field. Dark but homely mud caves dug into the slopes. The small windows did not let in enough light even in broad daylight. Criss-crossing footbridges and boulder dams ran along the hillsides, making every path an adventurous slide at this time of year.

The earth bunkers had one advantage: they were warm and offered sufficient protection against the increasingly intense day and night raids by Soviet air force units. Together with two comrades, I lived in a chamber with 3 beds, or rather straw sack boxes, which smelled pervasively of some kind of pest control agent.

One of the first days in Kursk had brought our squadron a loss that was irreplaceable in the truest sense of the word: one of our pilot sergeants had fallen, who had been nicknamed "Sun" for years because of his unclouded, cheerful nature. It was not the death of a pilot that befell him, it was an everyday soldier's death. We all found this particularly tragic. "Sonne" was standing by his plane when the dark humming of the Soviet IL-2 and the bright howling of the accompanying La-5 fighters mingled with the sounds of normal flight operations. Like spectators at a giant fireworks display, we heard the firing and impact of the aircraft's cannons and the detonation of the small, highly explosive fragmentation bombs.

The Soviet pilots were dashing, you had to give them credit for that. Despite the furious defensive fire of the light and medium anti-aircraft guns, they kept crashing down on new targets with their somewhat cumbersome attack aircraft. Torn fuselages, burning tanks and shredded tail units marked their path.

"Sonne" had unfortunately thrown himself into cover right next to the landing gear of his plane, although there was a splinter trench a few meters away. One of these dangerous "little bombs" exploded right in front of him. Hit by a shower of splinters and bleeding from countless wounds, he was found in the control room. This news was incomprehensible to us all. When he was laid out for a small military funeral, I too had tears in my eyes. We had survived several enemy flights together.

"I've got a comrade, you won't find a better one!"

The situation in front of the 2nd Army turned the Kursk area into a first-rate defensive focal point. In order to put an end to the confusion of responsibilities, all flying units were placed under the command of an air commander. The reconnaissance results of our squadron thus became the focus of everyone's interest. The field telephone of our squadron command post no longer remained silent. Corps and divisions were no longer in contact with each other. The reports on the situation of our units in the Voronezh-Kastornoje area contradicted each other and were constantly overshadowed by new bad news.

Our crews were working non-stop. Most of them were exhausted to the point of collapse. They had reached the limits of their aeronautical and human capabilities. Dull eyes stared at each other from pale, unshaven faces. The men's hands trembled. The casualties piled up.

I had a nagging stomach ache. My head was pounding. The consequences of a serious air accident in the fall were becoming increasingly noticeable. My mood was irritable. Sleep no longer brought any relaxation. The tremendous tension of the day was echoed in confused dreams.

I shook myself out of my blankets. The dull light of the early day barely penetrated the frost on the windows. The wet wood made making a fire a game of patience. We filled the small cannon stove until it began to glow. I left our "molehole" with a washing bowl to fetch snow. After a few seconds, my hands began to stick to the metal. I quickly filled the bowl and fled back to the safety of our "cave".

It took a while before the water for the tea began to boil in an old, calcified pot. We toasted a few slices of hard-frozen bread on the stove top. Another roasted some sausage. Breakfast was ready.

There was nothing left of the good "airmen's rations" of the first years of the war. The wet frozen bread did not thaw completely even on the red-hot stove and burned before it had dried. The sausage seemed to come from the ice chambers of Siberia. The monotonous legume stew turned flying into a "balloon sport". Only slowly did the tiredness dissipate from our limbs. Speech became more animated. The "spirits of life" returned.

A restless night lay behind us. The Iwans had repeatedly attacked the place. Despite all our tiredness, the trembling of nearby bomb hits kept lifting us from our straw bags. What our anti-aircraft searchlights were illuminating was not exactly a frightening sight. It seemed as if the Red Air Fleet had cleared all the aviation museums of the USSR. Single and multi-engine aircraft of the oldest type were cruising around. Experts said that some of them had already seen action in the First World War. That was to be believed.

You seemed to be reliving some future novel by Jules Verne. Six fabric-covered, four-engined biplanes had been there the previous night. You could see the heads of the crew in the light of the searchlights. Our light anti-aircraft gun fired at them for all it was worth. But the birds were robust. The fabric nets trailed in long strips, but they flew. Only one twin-engine plane came down burning right at the edge of the field. As soon as the larger planes had finished their spectacle, a few "sewing machines" were circling around, U-2 was the official type designation. The strange whirring of the engine had probably contributed to this nickname. You could watch as the observer dropped the bombs by hand at an altitude of a few hundred meters.

In this way, the enemy caused constant unrest, but not only that, they also sometimes had considerable success. Sometime in December, one of them hit an ammunition train at Kschen station with a single 10 kg bomb, which then partially burned out under constant detonations. Our field railwaymen were able to save a large part of it in a death-defying effort. Nevertheless, in our thoughts we congratulated the "comrade" on the Order of Lenin, which he deserved.

Hurried footsteps trampled outside the cave. The door banged open. Shrouded in clouds of steam, the shadow of a detector.

"Lieutenant, you and your crew are to come to the command post immediately. There is an important mission."

"Understood, report that we will be there in 10 minutes at the latest."

I groped my way to my sleeping box. I carefully laid out my flying clothes: fur suit, fur boots, FT hood, gloves, belt with pistol, binoculars, map board. I packed the rest of the stuff into the garment bag, folded halfway neatly piece by piece. I couldn't imagine leaving my comrades with a mess and perhaps having to gather and pack wildly thrown and sloppy things. Even the last friendly service - which each of us always had in mind - should not be an occasion for bad memories. I put my personal belongings in my field bag. In contrast to the beginning of the war, my luggage had shrunk considerably in the fourth year. Everyone only carried the bare essentials. This not only had advantages for the man himself, but also for the squadron. Many a square meter of transport space could be put to better use in this way.

On the way to the command post, I pulled my woolly hat over my ears instead of my FT cap. A well-intentioned gift from my mother. The product of her tireless hands. Initially the target of many a mocking remark from my comrades, who soon came to envy me for the good piece. It was a thick hat made of heavy sheep's wool that could be pulled down to the shoulders. It

only left a cut-out for the eyes, mouth and nose, which you could also close. In pictures that my father had brought back from the First World War, he was depicted wearing a similar cap. It was obviously my mother's work even then, the result of her constant care, but also of her own bad experiences. My mother had become angry when, on one of my last vacations, I had refused to take what seemed to me to be a shapeless and naturally unsportsmanlike object with me. Now I was more than grateful for it. The woolly hat proved to be far better suited to the special conditions of the Russian winter than the head protectors supplied for work.

The cold seemed to have settled like a glacier between the hills. An almost antediluvian picture presented itself to us. On the slopes of the long winding valley, door after door, window after window were lined up, covered here and there by trees laden with snow or bushes covered in ripe branches. The cave dwellings of Stone Age people must have been laid out in a similar way. The safety ropes on the log dams resembled the long white threads of a spider's web. Here and there, thin threads of smoke rose from the ground. We had to be careful on these frozen paths, we quickly broke a foot and sprained an ankle. We were glad when we finally reached the wide expanse of the tarmac.

In the official language of our propaganda, we used to refer to this huge natural event as "General Winter". No, this was not a general who faced us here with his regiments and cannons. It was not a general who submitted to the command of one of the great commanders of this war. It was the God of battles himself, to whom everything had to obey, who shaped and determined the course of the battle on both sides, with friend and foe. This winter was not a weapon that could be subordinated to the will of man. It was the recognizable will of God to steer things in the direction he had mapped out, as if to say:

"Here I command, you human, obey my will. You may kill with your weapons, I will kill with mine. Weapons, as they have been mine from the beginning of the world and will always be mine." -

There was a lot of air traffic on the tarmac. Thin veils of fine drifting snow chased across the ground, reflecting the light of the sun in all the colors of the rainbow. A swarm of Ju 87 dive bombers taxied to take off, whipping the snow behind them in thick clouds. A squadron of Ju 88s joined in from the west. The hectic situation at the front was reflected in the restless activity of this front airfield.

Our command post was housed in a small barrack. How little this "nerve

center" of our mission corresponded to the ideas we still had in the first years of the war, or even to the school-like contents as they had been taught at the war school or the reconnaissance pilot school. A draughty barrack that even the glowing cannon stove could only warm up moderately. On a rickety folding table were the maps and aerial plans with entries on the situation.

The whole front was on the move. As macabre as it may sound, we were lucky that the Soviets did not withdraw their forces tied to Stalingrad as quickly as we had originally feared. If the Red Army generals had limited themselves to cutting off the pocket and instead thrown the bulk of their troops to the west, we would have found ourselves somewhere on the Dnieper long ago. The collapse of the defenders would have taken care of itself if the supply from the air had failed due to the distance.

In the past weeks and months, all our thoughts and feelings had been with those comrades who were fighting a gigantic battle between the Don and the Volga. Will a "historian" ever be able to appreciate this death? Generations will probably pass over it. Only when the hatred of some and the agony and pain of others have sunk into their graves will they rise again, these men of Stalingrad, who at a decisive moment in world history were unable to change the course of events, but were able to decisively influence their direction.

As bitter as the cup was that we had to empty to the brim, the more pathetic the behavior of generals and officers seemed to me in view of the sacrifice of countless ordinary soldiers, who also mentally surrendered themselves to the enemy in order to buy themselves a supposedly better exit from this war. Not realizing that history is more than a person's life can fill.

The collapse of the 2nd Royal Hungarian Army was complete. Army was complete. Abandoned by some of the officers, the hour came for the non-commissioned officers. In many Hungarian companies and battalions, these capable and proven non-commissioned officers, inspired by a deep sense of responsibility towards their soldiers, took command and tried to fight for a reasonably orderly retreat. Old Hungarian deputy officers, often already battle-hardened in the First World War, showed where the real Hungary stood. Often full of shame about what was happening, they placed themselves under the command of German commanders and were repeatedly able to achieve significant defensive successes. The deed of the Hungarian sergeant who managed to launch an assault with the remnants of his regiment to the east of Stary Oskol and to teach the shocked Iwans such a lesson that his regiment was able to join the retreat of the German units almost unchallenged.

In just a few days, a situation arose in the 2nd Army section that gave rise to fears of a second "Stalingrad". Although we had pointed out the impending danger early enough, not all divisions managed to break away from the enemy in a timely and orderly manner.

The entire VII AK, parts of the XIII AK and parts of the 2nd Royal Hungarian Army threatened to be encircled in the area southeast of Kastornoje. Army threatened to be encircled in the area southeast of Kastornoje.

We tried to help where we could. What my comrades did in those days will not be recorded in the history books of this war, because words cannot describe it. We were able to track down many a German soldier who had been thought lost and show him the safe way to the next larger unit. From spaces far behind the Red Army's attacking lines, we were able to guide some units onto the right path to their own troops or enable them to break through to the encircled divisions. Many of the units that were already in a hopeless situation were thus able to find their way out of encirclement and destruction, often at the last hour.

How shocked we were when we learned of the end of the soldiers of a Bavarian regiment who had been trapped in the area southwest of Voronezh. After desperately fighting back, they were taken prisoner, forced to undress and mowed down with machine guns. A first lieutenant managed to make his way to a division in the cauldron with a few surviving soldiers, some of them badly wounded and wearing only their underwear. A few days later, one of my comrades managed to provide gruesome confirmation of this bloody deed.

The boss briefly explained the location to me using the map:

"In the area north of the Kastornoje-Kschen-Schigry road, mixed Soviet formations of unknown strength are advancing rapidly to the west and south. It is to be expected that the road and railroad will be interrupted within a few hours. The units advancing southwest from the area northeast of Kastornoje appear to have already joined up west of Gorchechnoye with the tips of the troops of the Soviet 40th Army advancing out of the small Don bend. Thus a new encirclement battle is looming. While the VII AK has its units largely under control, the situation for the XIII AK appears to be rather confused. Their mission is:

1. to determine whether the Soviets had actually succeeded in encircling the Kastornoje-Gortschetschnoje-Kokol area. The reports from the divisions

contradict each other.

2. to determine where the tops of the Soviet formations are located north of the Kastornoje-Schigry railroad line and south of it to about the Kochatowka-Stary Oskol line.

3. where scattered German units and formations are still fighting their way back to their own lines.

A note: The units of the Fliegerführer almost constantly report contact with enemy fighters, so keep your eyes open. Break a leg!"

A quick handshake, a gesture of honor and we were dismissed. Our captain's face also looked tired and weary. The cheerfulness that had bonded us so much with him had disappeared from his features.

The final preparations for take-off began with the usual routine. There would have been no need for instructions to line up all the tasks as ordered. The whole thing had become something mechanically self-evident and yet precise execution was vital.

On the way to the plane, a piercingly cold wind began to sweep across the airfield. We struggled to stay on the wings as we boarded. We were stiff and immobile in the thick combinations.

Cold starts had also become a habit. Much to the annoyance of the mechanics, as the engines were put under enormous strain and showed increasing signs of wear. After a short warm-up, Hein joined the line of aircraft taxiing for take-off. The bird rumbled over the hard snow and the frozen taxiways. The wingtips bobbed up and down. The wind chased the drifting snow whirled up by other planes past the cockpit in thick clouds. Finally it was our turn. We called flight control, then the command came: "Clear for take-off for Berta-Kurfürst!"

Hein taxied onto the runway and slowly pushed the throttle forward. The engines roared to life. Once again, we began our frantic journey across the vastness of the airfield. The heavy payload gave us a hard time, the plane bumped and shook like a truck over the runway until it finally picked up the necessary speed. We took off a few hundred meters before the end of the runway. A quick jerk and the landing gear was folded in. Hein stepped on the gas and pulled the overloaded plane over some Ju 88s at the edge of the field. The tops of the trees passed beneath us, close enough to touch. After a few kilometers, we were hanging over the Kursk-Voronezh railroad line, which determined our rough course to the east. Diagonally below us, freight trains rolled westwards at block intervals. The railwaymen were trying to salvage whatever rolling stock they could.

With the map board on my knees, I recapitulated the details of the mission

and marked the most important targets and areas we had to approach.

A handle on the radio switch:

"Or from Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

The ground radio operator's voice could only be heard indistinctly:

"Berta-Kurfürst, I can hear you with QSA 3. Reception will probably get even better."

"Right, or. We'll get back to you."

I called the other radio stations one after the other.

Werner mumbled into the microphone:

"Not much can happen. I can hardly move here."

I wasn't entirely comfortable with it either. We had about 300 kg of cigarettes, chocolate and emergency rations in the cockpit. My view of the gunner was completely blocked. We had lashed the parcels down well, but we couldn't have a cornering fight, otherwise everything would blow up in our faces.

Even now, we had to keep our eyes open, because at any moment we could come into contact with hunters that had been approaching our spot over the last few days. Unpleasant, because we were flying directly into the sun. There was still a haze in the hollows, but there was not a cloud in the sky for miles around.

We had flown over Bendery at an altitude of about 800 meters when it started. Red stars under the right engine.

"Hunters from the right!"

The next moment I realized my mistake. A swarm of Soviet IL-2 fighter planes crossed our course. The white-sprayed wings barely stood out from the landscape. Only the large red stars on the wings and fuselage had warned me. No danger to us if we didn't crash directly into them. Although the IL-2 was faster than us, it had less climbing ability. Things only became dangerous when they were accompanied by fighters, and that was almost always the case.

So close to the site, the use of hunters had to be worthwhile.

"Tiger from Berta-Kurfürst, a swarm IL 2, course 320°, plan square CT 34."

"Berta-Kurfürst, Tiger has understood."

We commuted far to the north and south. The Zhigry-Kursk, Zhigry-Budanovka and Zhigry-Yasenki roads were crowded with troops of all branches of the armed forces flooding back.

The sun had moved higher, but was still unable to penetrate the clouds of haze that lay here and there in hollows and valleys. Many things that would

have aroused my "curiosity" were hidden from view.

Over the "self-understanding" I could clearly feel the restlessness that had gripped each of us. Werner was breathing heavily, Hein kept clearing his throat. We were approaching the battle zone east of Schigry. Towards the horizon, flames and clouds of black smoke broke through the glittering haze and gave unmistakable signs of the battle that was raging there.

We went far south to the Tim depression and flew over the range of hills to Mansurowo in the Kschen depression. Small and large columns on all paths and roads, generally heading southwest. North again. Between Golovinka and Zhigry there were five freight trains under steam, heading west, which obviously had no access to Zhigry station. The small station was blocked by loading work, which could be dangerous. At least one track had to be cleared for passage.

"Tiger from Berta-Kurfürst, five freight trains on the open track in front of Schigry station, heading west. At least one lane of the station must be cleared immediately."

"Berta-Kurfürst, we have understood. Notify the railroad administration immediately."

"Course 120°, stay at 1000 m."

In a light gliding flight, Hein pulled the plane back south, swinging wide. A few kilometers southeast of Terovskoye, the flow of our troops suddenly broke off. I shot a recognition signal over a column coming up from Grayworonka. Were they Russians already? Before the flares had completely burnt out, we saw confirmation below. Swastika flags were laid out. The soldiers waved up. Flares went up. An experienced troop. They knew why we were circling around here. We went down even further. Then it was clear to see: it was our own infantry. Hein wiggled his wings.

Flying low, a few meters above the snow-covered fields, skipping over individual groups of trees, we chased towards Grayworonka. A widely dispersed infantry platoon. The soldiers in white camouflage suits recognized us too late. The soldiers threw themselves into the snow at lightning speed. Were they already the first Iwans? We turned in ready to fire. As we approached again, they jumped up and waved. One fired a flare pistol to signal recognition, others hurriedly kicked a swastika into the snow.

"Werner, get ready, we'll drop you cigarettes and rations," I called to the back.

I cranked up the screen shaft. Hein took the throttle off and floated slowly towards the small pile. Aiming "over thumb and forefinger", we tried the drop.

"Ready," shouted Werner.

About two hundred meters before the first men, I called out:

"Now!"

A few meters above the snow, it couldn't go wrong. The boxes landed close to the soldiers in the snow. We saw how some of them ran over and picked up what they found. When we turned back, they were almost doing a "St. Vitus dance" with joy. They waved with everything they had. If only we could have thrown them more. We knew what it was like down there. The Landser had certainly been without rest and food for days. Cigarettes and chocolate must have seemed like a gift from heaven to them.

"Course 210°, leave Grayworonka to the left."

South of the village, we recognized the flash of muzzle flashes. Only a few meters high, we thundered over the low farmhouses of Senoje and Dubinowka. Landser waved to us. Between the last houses, quadruple anti-aircraft guns on self-propelled guns in good cover. So these places were still in our own hands. The comrades had probably recognized us as we approached and fired recognition signals. It was good to have light anti-aircraft guns nearby, they could keep fighters off our backs if need be. We opened the picture slider again and took out a few cartons of cigarettes.

We turned back towards Grayworonka. There was little going on in the south and south-east. But the first enemy was barely a thousand meters north of the last houses. Six T-34s with accompanying infantry were spread far apart to the left and right of the road coming down from Sovietskoye. A tank fired on the approach. With the flash of the shot, a cloud of snow rose up. One of the small farmhouses blew apart. We turned so low that the tips of the wings almost erased the ground. The infantry had thrown themselves into the snow and were firing at us with all available weapons.

A few hundred meters behind the tanks followed some trucks and tractors with light field guns. Even further back, perhaps two dozen armored vehicles.

"We'll attack the column."

Shortly before Natalino, Hein turned the plane around. He had to make use of every bit of cover, because the "comrades" had been warned.

Over a group of trees, we ran straight into the armored vehicles. Hein fired one or two bursts with the fixed machine guns to keep the defenses down. The tracer found its target. The bullets mowed over the column. The horses reared up and raced into the field or towards the village, pulling the wagons behind them. The Iwans threw themselves off the sledges. Werner's tracer bulbs dug into the trucks. Another short burst of fire at the tanks to "knock on

the door" and we were over the village. As we turned, we saw flames coming out of one of the trucks. Black smoke billowed up. The fuel for the tanks had caught fire. A small relief for our rearguards. The tanks now had to maneuver a little more carefully.

Back over Grayworonka, waving German soldiers, further to the southeast. Around Gologusovka, the ragged black patches of shell impacts accumulated in the snow. Shortly before the first houses, a burning T-34. The black clouds of smoke drifted for miles across the fields. We were met with heavy defensive fire from the village. Tracer ammunition came at us from all sides. Between the houses there were individual tanks and trucks, sledges and covered vehicles. The village was therefore firmly in the hands of the enemy.

We had seen enough. We turned back towards Sovietskoye. At about 1200 meters we flew over our old place Kschen. Burnt-out ruins stared into the winter sky, where halls and shelters had stood. Between the houses of the village, individual tanks, about thirty trucks. Heavy defensive fire from light anti-aircraft guns from the area around the station. My eyes searched for the house where Maria and her mother lived. Not a soul around. Had they seen us?

It was time to send a first message:

"Or from Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Berta-Kurfürst, here Oder, I can hear you clearly."

"Or, enemy tank units have advanced south between Kastornoje and Sowjetskoje and are about one kilometer from Grayworonka. South of Gortschetschnoje, strong enemy units have crossed the Kastornoje-Stary Oskol railroad line and have reached Gologusowka. Cutting off our own units east of the railroad line can only be a matter of hours. To the west of the two chocks only thin own security units."

"Berta-Kurfürst, we understand. Take care."

"Berta-Kurfürst, Elbe was listening in."

"Berta-Kurfürst, Tiger was listening in."

We had flown over the Kastornoje-Schigry railroad line. Melikhovo was occupied by the Soviets. Enemy tanks, advancing on a broad front to the west, had crossed the Kschen depression. Heavy fighting had left its mark on the otherwise immaculate white of the snow. Burning houses, burning vehicles. To the northwest, the enemy had taken Koroteiyevka and crossed the railroad line at Barkova. Krasnaya Polyana was under heavy fire from tank artillery. The shots came from the area around Barkova, the flaming spears of the shots were clearly visible. From the north, around 20 tanks,

followed by armored personnel carriers, advanced towards the road west of Gernostaevka. Another tank formation tried to advance towards Krasnaya Polyana, but seemed to have gotten caught in the fire of its own Paks. Several tanks were on fire. At Marmischi station we turned back and headed east again. Our own infantry and Paks were in position north of the road. Swastika flags were laid out. Hopefully our comrades recognized the danger they were facing. We flew at the tanks at a height of just under three hundred meters and dropped several purple tank smoke signals, the general warning sign for imminent danger of tank attacks. We thought that these were the last of our own units when we realized what had happened. Far ahead, on the railroad embankment east of Gernostajewka, Kradschützen were engaged in a heavy defensive battle. They obviously formed the rearguard and had no idea that the Ivan was threatening the road in their rear. Vierlingsflak and Pak secured Gernostajewka to the north. Here I had to act immediately. Message block out.

"20 Fdl. Pz. advance from Barkowa to the south and threaten to interrupt the road west of Gernostajewka. More tanks are advancing from Barkova to Krasnaya Polyana. Danger!!!"

With a small sketch, I put the message in the leather case and dropped it in the middle of the place.

East of the railroad embankment, Soviet infantry in regimental strength had come to a standstill under heavy defensive fire from the Kradschützen despite tank support. Strong enemy formations were gathered in the Kschen depression, which looked bad.

"Elbe von Berta-Kurfürst, come in, please."

"Berta-Kurfürst von Elbe, come in please. QSA 4."

"Elbe, 20 fdl. tanks from Barkowa in the direction of Gernostajewka. Another armored unit from Barkova in the direction of Krasnaya Polyana. Assembly of strong motorized and tank units in the Kschen depression. Gernostajewka is still held by a motorcycle infantry battalion."

"Berta-Kurfürst, we have understood."

"Or was listening in!"

"Tiger was listening in!"

Slowly climbing, we continued eastwards. How much the situation had changed since the summer of the previous year. Before the onslaught of the 2nd Army, the Red Army had evacuated this area in a hurry. Now it was our turn.

Hein broke his silence:

"Do you notice that there's hardly anything behind the bumper bandages?"

He had observed correctly. The mostly very strong assault groups were hardly followed by any forces worth mentioning. I searched every road, every path and footbridge, no trucks, no tanks, no mounted columns. The snow-covered hills lay quietly below us, seemingly untouched, as if death and destruction had not just passed over them. It was only when we flew over the Liwny-Kastornoje railroad line at Prokurowo that there was more activity below. A motley crowd marched towards Kastornoje, but further to the east it was quiet again. I searched every hedge, every group of houses, every path with my binoculars for signs of life. Nothing moved.

Only in the hollow of the Veduga stream did unrest return to the landscape. Enemy infantry entered Staraja Veduga on a broad front. They were followed by mounted artillery and cavalry.

Werner came forward:

"I'm not sure. I think I saw some men waving up to us northwest of Veduga. They could have been Landser."

Hein immediately put the "mill" into a steep bend and took the throttle off. We hovered carefully towards the indicated spot. Thank goodness we had the sun behind us. About 15 km northwest of Veduga was an expanse of forest and cuddly terrain. We searched every group of trees, then I saw it. In a shallow hollow, by a barn covered in deep snow, stood a few men waving blankets and coats. Great caution was called for here. If they really were our own countrymen, clumsy behavior could give them away. If it was a trap set by the Iwans, we could have been taken for a ride. So, keep your eyes open. We searched the surrounding area. There was still no danger to the men from Staraja Veduga. It was a different story from Prokurowo. We glided barely 50 meters above them.

There were perhaps 12 or 15 men running around down there. No doubt they were German soldiers. Two or three men were also waving up from a large mound of straw nearby. Hein wagged his wings to show that we had recognized them, then we turned away again.

I drew an approximate sketch of the situation on my message pad. If the men managed to get past Gorojainowo, between the villages of Ploskaja and Nischnaja, they could reach the troops fighting there north of the railroad line at the Nischnedewitsk station and would thus be safe, at least for the time being. I drew the route of the march on a section quickly torn out of Hein's map.

"Werner, we'll throw them some food too."

Under cover of a ridge, we stalked the barn again. The men jumped up and threw the army into the air.

"Go," I shouted. Through the small window in front of the bombsight flew the dropping shell with the pennant. Werner sent a few boxes of emergency rations, cigarettes and chocolate after it.

"Great," Werner spoke up. "The boxes almost fell at the men's feet."

As we took off, we saw the men collecting the things they had dropped. It was dangerous for them and us to linger any longer.

Weeks had passed. The little episode of our mission had long been forgotten. The squadron was now in Konotop, west of Kursk. Busy examining and analyzing aerial photographs, I paid little attention to my surroundings. A field gray officer had entered the command post with a non-commissioned officer. I heard the chief ask what he wanted. Then the NCO stood in front of my table. I looked up. Bright, young eyes shone from a face that had grown old early. He held his field cap in his hands, embarrassed. I looked at him questioningly.

"Mr. Lieutenant, I would like to thank you!"

I stood up and shook his hand.

"Thank you for what?"

I had a good memory for the faces of my fellow human beings, but I had certainly never seen this man before.

"We don't even know each other," I added.

He replied with a laugh:

"Oh yes, lieutenant, we know each other very well. I'm the leader of the group that you and your crew helped out of a jam at Veduga. You dropped us a map, a map of the situation and rations!"

Suddenly the image was back and was never forgotten from then on: the barn in the hollow, the men waving. The joy of the happy return overcame me too. I grabbed the man by the shoulders.

"You did it after all. We thought about you often in the days that followed. We kept asking ourselves whether you had made it through. You still had about 20 km to the edge of the cauldron and the Ivan had already bypassed you with strong forces."

Then came his story:

"Shortly before your plane showed up, we were pretty desperate because we had three seriously wounded comrades lying in the barn who could only be transported lying down. All our attempts to get through had failed by then. You can't imagine what a boost your appearance gave us, because we thought we were already lost. We had nothing to smoke, no food for the fourth day and only snow water to keep us going. With your map and the sketch, we

tried again. After dark, we managed to make our way to the edge of the basin in an almost seven-hour march, but were in danger of getting stuck there. One of my men managed to break through. We were then picked up by a strong assault force. I didn't lose a single man. The seriously wounded had long since flown home.

My comrades and I swore back then that if we ever reached the German lines again, we would do everything we could to thank you. That's why I'm here today with my commander."

He pulled the piece of card and my sketch out of his coat pocket, carefully wrapped up. We celebrated the healthy "reunion" in our recreation room. The non-commissioned officer told us what unbridled courage to face life our report had given the men. They would have loved to have stormed off straight away. The rations really were a last resort, as they would hardly have lasted any longer on snow water alone.

Towards evening, he sent two men ahead as a scouting party. This enabled them to cover the first 10 km fairly quickly, but then they had to proceed with great caution.

His commander, a young captain, also thanked him. Both described their experiences for a long time after breaking out of the cauldron, until they managed to reach the German lines after a march of over 200 km west of Obojan. Our squadron also played a major part in the successful breakout and securing the march. All this was achieved with astonishingly low casualties.

We were pleased to have been successful in this way and were a little proud. Not a success that was measured by the number of opponents shot down, but a success that was expressed in the small word: "Thank you!"

It was not the first time in my life that I experienced the deep meaning that lay in this "please", in this "thank you". This time, perhaps most poignantly, only because the thanks of these soldiers was only for the self-evident charity that we would have shown to our comrades here, but also certainly to anyone else in need. This commitment to a fellow human being for his own sake, which many have lost; which makes the request superfluous, because humility before the need of the neighbor does not need the request.

Strangely enough, people preach freedom, equality and brotherhood and no longer understand the meaning of charity because they no longer understand the meaning of human community. They want to be free from every human bond and are incapable of recognizing that there is no freedom without the neighbour, without community.

We have all forgotten the fundamental truth: that the community only

grows from the sum of the duties that each individual is willing to take on voluntarily for the sake of charity. Only from these duties do our rights arise.

Werner's reputation:

"Hunter at the back top right!" took us completely by surprise.

I threw myself around in a flash and saw them, perhaps 600 to 800 meters above us. Four La-5s in a dense swarm formation, heading 160°. The attempt to get to my machine gun failed. Hein made a turn, wanted to escape in the direction of the boiler. The steep counter turn pushed me to the bottom of the cockpit. I pulled myself up by the handholds with all my strength to get onto the small emergency seat. After a few seconds, the fighters were vertically above us. Had they not seen us? They stubbornly maintained their course. It could be that they were blinded by the sun and therefore didn't recognize us. As quickly as they appeared, they were gone again, our luck. I squeezed myself forward again and fastened my seatbelt.

Still thinking about the fighters, I suspected their surprise attack when tracer ammunition went up all around us. No, it was the fire of light anti-aircraft guns and countless machine guns that we had flown right in front of.

Where were we? I had to use the map to find my way around the terrain again. At an altitude of barely a hundred meters we flew over a strong Soviet tank formation. Ahead and far apart were some T-70 reconnaissance tanks, followed by around thirty T-34s and behind them four or five of the super-heavy KW 2s. Three or four of the tanks were on fire. Behind the railroad embankment in good cover, 8.8 anti-aircraft guns fired for all they were worth. A T-70 flew apart, shortly afterwards a T-34 burned.

Two Ju 88s glided down on the attacking tanks and dropped their bomb loads more or less ineffectively on the T-34s. There was no trace of the strategy and tactics of air warfare. Pointless use of two valuable aircraft.

We turned west again over the railroad line. The Ivan tried to cross the railroad embankment with strong forces west of Nizhnedevitsk. To the south, towards Kuchugery, strong troop masses with countless harnessed and motorized vehicles, certainly parts of the VII and XIII AK, which had already been cut off. Again to the east, towards Novo-Olshanka. One heavy and two light howitzer batteries were in position just west of the village. Shot after shot, they chased to the northeast, towards the advancing Red Army units. Behind the railroad embankment, deeply dug in, were the positions of our infantry. They waved us up.

"Werner, ready for the drop!"

"We stay south of the railroad line, above our own associations, and go as far down as possible."

I also unbuckled the parachute straps, cranked up the screen shaft and crawled next to the radio. The plane hovered calmly over the snow-covered hills. Hein kept close behind the infantry positions. I could hear the artillery firing.

"Height just under 30 m, we're ready to go," Hein reported.

I could see the infantrymen waving through the opening of the viewing shaft. Parcel after parcel flew out. What had just arrived: Cigarettes, dried bread, emergency rations, chocolate. We worked feverishly. We had to unload a few hundredweight and the opening of the chute was not very big. We were hovering over a village, with hundreds, even thousands of waving soldiers below us.

"Careful, hold on, I'm turning back again."

I was pressed against the radio for a moment, then it went on. Sweat was pouring down my face. Above the battery positions, we finally had the last boxes out.

"Thank God," grinned Werner, "I feel better now."

He also spoke from my soul. The load had hindered us considerably. Close the screen well and move forward again. We fastened the parachute straps and that was that. For Hein, too, flying with the overloaded plane was no real joy. The bombs could be dropped in an "emergency drop" in case of danger, but getting the many packages overboard would have been an almost hopeless task. An audible sigh of relief went through our "mill".

"Stay above the railroad line!"

"Understood," Hein replied.

"Or from Berta-Kurfürst. We're flying south via Dewitsa." "Berta-Kurfürst understood, we're still on reception."

The air liaison command at VIL AK was somewhere down there in the cauldron. The command was led by Oberleutnant Wolf, a quiet, thoughtful comrade. Although he couldn't deny that he was a school teacher, everyone liked him. He had returned to his post a few days ago without much thought, even though the lockdown had been looming for a long time.

To the north, Soviet troops pushed towards the railroad line on a broad front. West of Kusika, their own infantry broke away from the enemy. The exemplary security suggested an old active unit. Further south, own troops engaged in heavy defensive fighting.

The Latnaja-Khokhol railroad line was clearly intended as an interception line for the troops coming from the Voronezh area. The western edge of the town was under heavy fire from our own artillery. We had no choice but to approach the Don between Lafnaya and Devitsa. Flying low, we stayed right next to the railroad. Incredibly, railroad pioneers were already at work. They threw themselves between the tracks and took cover on the embankment. The signalmen on the masts stared at us in horror. Soviet troops were slowly advancing southwest from the Don. Group after group marched in deep formation. Far too cautiously, it seemed to me. They no longer needed to approach the enemy. Amongst the infantry were riflemen in white snow shirts who barely stood out from their surroundings. On the northern edge of Devitsa a dozen smaller tanks, probably older T-26s.

Without interruption, I sent my messages to "Oder". I sketched the most important details on the map.

Completely unexpectedly, we were plunged into a cauldron from one second to the next.

Frenzied defensive fire pounded around us. Fire spewed towards us from the muzzles of countless machine guns and light anti-aircraft guns. A few meters separated us from the steel girders of a bridge. Damn it, we should have turned south at the eastern edge of Dewitsa. Now we had crashed directly onto the bridge over the Danube. Only a few meters separated us from the steel girders. Pioneers were at work and stared up at us in surprise. The pearl necklaces of the tracers drew closer together. Down onto the Don, that could only be death. Why didn't they hit us? They had to hit us! A shower of sparks fell. The Don seemed to be on fire, spitting fire at us. We whirled through a hellish maw, Satan threatened to devour us. Was there no end to this cruel game? Were we flying over a sea of flames or were we floating slowly, like a balloon, over the fire crater of a volcano? We had burst the ice of the river and its unleashed floods rose up towards us, foaming.

"How dare you, stranger, disturb my peace again," the stream seemed to roar.

The Cossacks began to dance, they whirled around us and charged at us, stomping a frenzied round dance. Closely chained together, they drew their circles ever tighter.

"We've got you, Fritz, your hour is almost here!"

No matter how many times we tried, they would not open their circle. A procession of a thousand lights surged around us. Chorales roared through the Orthodox flood of lights in this Russian cathedral. The lights of a

thousand candles flared up and floated towards us, as if carried by the hands of countless angels.

The dance became more and more frenzied. The Cossacks jumped on their horses. They raised flaming torches and charged. The snow swirled up under the hooves of countless horses and turned into a veil of millions of tears. Fear? Danger? Where had they gone? The light from the torches blinded me. I looked and looked, trying to make out the faces of the riders charging towards us with drawn sabres. A devastating sabre blow hit me. I was cut down. My senses faded.

Then it's our plane again. It trembled and shook. Fire and smoke from countless explosions swirled around us.

No, the curtain had fallen, the dance from hell was over. I threatened to vomit. My conscience was burning. Had I done something wrong, not paid attention for just one second? It was madness to approach this bridge at low level. I leaned forward. The ice of the river sprayed the light of the sun up towards us. The flood of light blinded me. I raised my head and looked. This light was life. We were free, exhausted, staggering out of the wild round dance. We threw ourselves up onto the snow waves of the nearby shore. One last look at the ice of the river, we were saved. God was with us!

A miracle had happened. We stared at each other with pale faces. The fear in our eyes burned away and the light of life returned.

"I've had enough," came dryly from Hein's lips. "Course 200°. Climb to 1500 meters."

"Will do."

The altimeter showed 1300 m above Kochalowka. A chaotic picture below. Wherever you looked, Hungarian troops were flooding back. Where had the Siebert group gone? While I was still scanning the range of hills in front of us with my binoculars, I saw rising flares. That had to be them. From Krasnolipje to Rogovaloje, our troops had set up a blocking position, which also served as an interception point for the Hungarians. Vehicles were burning in the hollow east of Krasnolipje. There was terrible confusion there. Motorized vehicles ruthlessly made their way to the northwest, forcing harnessed vehicles and retreating infantry off the road. On the north-western edge of Platawa a Soviet armored wedge, the town itself firmly in the hands of the enemy. To the south, the same picture everywhere, burning houses and vehicles as far as the eye could see. Tanks drove the exhausted Hungarians before them.

We turned to the southwest, where the picture changed abruptly. The

Soviets stormed west towards Sary Oskol with an unprecedented mass of tanks. The first shock wedge was already advancing from Pervaya Rossosch towards Schatalovka. Thrust wedge followed thrust wedge. Counting was pointless here. I estimated around two hundred T-34s, accompanied by at least 50 KW IIs, rolling down through the Potudan depression. That was an armored corps. In view of the force of the attack, the complete encirclement of our divisions between Khokhol and Gorchechnoye could not take much longer.

"Schorsch, cancel the order. We've got 45 minutes of fuel left."

"Good, course 300°."

Towards the northwest, the situation calmed down again. The withdrawal movements of the units were largely orderly, although Soviet combat groups had already broken through north of Sary Oskol. Fighting stubbornly, Hungarian and German troops withdrew to the north, towards the cauldron. There the masses became denser and denser. Hopefully the VII Corps managed to break out of the encirclement in time.

"Or from Berta-Kurfürst, please come."

"Berta-Kurfürst, come in, please."

"Or, a Soviet armored corps is marching westward in the Potudan depression. The tips have reached Shatalovka, southeast of Sary-Oskol. Platawa in the hands of the enemy. Group Siebert holds a blocking position between Krasnolipje and Rogo Valoje. Disengagement movements not recognizable. To the west, Hungarian and German units are retreating in an orderly fashion towards Gorchechnoye. Soviet advance units have crossed the railroad line southwest of Rogovoje and are advancing to the north and northwest."

A longer break followed.

"Or, do you understand? We have to cancel the order."

"Berta-Kurfürst, we have understood. Can you still fly to the area west of Gorchechnoye? Or would you like a brief orientation on the situation there?"

Werner interrupted:

"500 m below us, a squadron of IL-2s, heading northeast."

I leaned forward. Gosh, they had a big flight day today. They must have come back from Sary Oskol.

"Keep your eyes open!"

"Or from Berta-Kurfürst, will be made. An IL-2 bandage course 60°."

We searched the area in shallow curves. There was anti-aircraft fire from

Rogovoje station, so that was where the Russians were. To the west, fierce fighting was raging around Baranovo. Half the town was on fire. On the western edge of the village there were several T-70s and T-34s. Between Rogovoje and Baranovo there was a column of perhaps 20 trucks, including Iwans. To the north, Betekovo was in the hands of the Soviets. A battalion-sized Mot unit marched northwest, and a dozen tanks in battle formation from Borovka to Grayvoronka. Troitskoye, a few kilometers west of Gorchechnoye, was under devastating artillery fire. Only after a long search did we discover the firing batteries. It was our own artillery, which was located east of Gorchechnoye. There was fierce fighting down there. Our own infantry was trying to clear the town. The town and station of Gorchelchnoye were firmly in their own hands. To the north and south stood at least one of their own divisions. Behind them were frighteningly dense masses of troops. They could only count themselves lucky that the Red Air Force was not more active, as that would have resulted in heavy losses. To the west, the Soviet troops had hardly made any progress, although there were only the thin veils of rearguards left.

Heavy fighting raged again northwest of the Alisovo station. Light and heavy field howitzers kept the Udobnoye-Golo-gusovka road under heavy fire. Fierce fighting also raged around Grayvoronka. Black smoke from burning tanks and vehicles, interspersed with white-gray clouds of burning houses, covered the fields all around. The Soviets advanced on Nikolayevka and Bichek in regimental strength. The towns to the north and north-east were overrun by Soviet motorized rifle divisions. These could have been shock units of the 13th Soviet Army that had come down from the north. Kastornoje had long since fallen into the hands of the Soviets.

I had sent my reports in uninterrupted succession. The VII AK acknowledged.

"Berta-Kurfürst von Oder, we have understood. Say hello to your comrades. Break a leg!"

Hopefully the leadership in the boiler did not lose its nerve. Superior own forces could still be gathered. I estimated the total strength at 8-9 divisions. With appropriate massing and concentration, the Soviets would not have been able to offer any serious resistance to a breakout. Danger only threatened from the north. The Soviet forces coming up from the south and south-east were not exactly meagre, but still too few to form a solid ring of encirclement. The Soviet leadership had operational targets in the depths of the area in mind: the Kharkov area and the Kursk area. For this task, they gathered all available forces and threw them to the west. In contrast to

Stalingrad, they probably hoped that the VII AK problem would take care of itself.

"Course 280°!"

"Got it!"

The job wasn't over yet. I searched all the streets and towns with my binoculars. The situation had hardly changed since the approach. Down there it was: "Save yourself, whoever can!" Wherever you looked, our own troops were retreating westwards. All the Ivan had to do was roll.

"Berta-Kurfürst von Elbe, please come!"

"Elbe, come in, please."

"Berta-Kurfürst. Stukas report strong Soviet formation northeast of Zhigry. Marching west towards Alekseevka. Do you still have enough fuel to look at this?"

"Elbe, got it. We may be short, but it will be done." "Berta-Kurfürst, we have understood and will remain on reception." "Course 320°."

"They always think of something at the last minute," grumbled Hein.

The sun had reached its highest point. The radiant light of the haze on the horizon limited our view. We first flew to Polenoje and Zenkino. Heavy fighting was still raging east of Krasnaya Polyana. Wherever you looked, there were burning vehicles and tanks.

At Plaskowka we then found the column we had mentioned. It stretched for almost 10 km, around two hundred harnessed vehicles, thirty to forty trucks, a few harnessed batteries. They weren't Soviets!

They had other protruders. Or were they booty guns? In any case, we had to be careful. At an altitude of about 1000 m, I fired a recognition signal. Nothing moved, no response. There was no disturbance about our presence, everything marched on calmly. Hein made a downswing. We took another look at the pile from perhaps 700 meters. Again a recognition signal, again no response. I was beginning to feel queasy; a separate unit would not have been so stubborn. Finally, almost at the rear guard, some soldiers waved and laid out a swastika flag. Had they ever seen anything like it? Didn't anyone there have a flare gun?

"Course west. They're a very stubborn bunch. They just won't budge," I shouted to Hein.

I turned over to the radio and switched to "transmit".

I saw them over Hein's head. The blood seemed to freeze in my veins. Flashing white arrows raced towards us, blood-red stars on their surfaces. One, two, three, then another. What were those birds?

"Hunter from the left," Werner and I shouted almost simultaneously.

"Emergency call Berta-Kurfürst, attack four La-5 north of Schigry. Altitude 800 m!"

Switch back to "self-understanding".

Seat belts on, legs pulled up, seat pushed back, turn 180°, left hand on the locking handle of the cupola, right hand on the handle of the MG 81 and pulled up, MG loaded and unlocked.

"Where are they? I don't see them anymore!"

As if summoned, they were there again. Lined up like a string of pearls, one curved behind the other in attack position. After a slight turn, they swung in on us from behind on the left. The snow-white tops of the hulls and wings outlined their contours in the deep blue sky. The red stars on the wings seemed oversized. The first tore his machine around, the white disappeared, the bulky round of the radial engine took on a profile. The pilot's head was clearly visible in the cockpit.

"Hunter in the back left."

Werner sent out his first burst of fire. The machine roared. Fire flashed from the muzzles of the twin machine gun, barely two meters in front of me, countless glowing dots racing towards the first attacker. He pulled up a little, then he was at the edge of my circle. Let him sit up, bend over, my machine gun was also hammering.

200 m, 150 m, 100 m, the bulky monster grew bigger and bigger. The muzzle flashes of its cannons and machine guns on the wings and engine flashed. It was too high, the sheaf passed over us.

The horizon behind me began a great dance. I was pressed against the bulkheads. I could only hold on to the jump seat with difficulty. Hein had pulled the plane up and was throwing it around in a steep turn. The tracers of the other fighters passed somewhere far below us. I tried to aim my machine gun but couldn't manage it. Another burst of fire from Werner. My temples were pounding, my pulse racing.

"Where are they?" I shouted.

Hein tried to dive away to the right.

"Do you see them?"

"No! Yes, they are! They're right below us!" shouted Werner.

Less than 50 m below, they raced through. The "comrades" had quite a lot of "steam" on them. I could make out every detail, even the faces of the pilots under the FT canopies, then they were gone again.

Hein took another bend, and heaven and earth began their dance again. I could only hold on to the emergency seat with all my strength and clung desperately to the handles. There was a great danger of being thrown into the "bag" with Werner.

I saw them again. One close behind the other, they tore their engines into the sky on the upswing. Then diagonally behind us, perhaps at an angle of 60°, a roll and downswing.

"Hunter from behind above."

The first one pushed hard, the top of the wings and fuselage became visible. He tried to sit right behind us. I let him sit on the circular sight. Almost simultaneously, our machine guns cracked and the tracer raced towards the attacker. He wobbled nervously, our defensive fire was well placed, which made him uneasy.

Hein waited a few more seconds, then he also pulled up. We plunged steeply into the sky. The earth moved behind the plane, the horizon appeared above me. My ears cracked and roared. The tracers of the machine guns passed low below us.

"Beginner," I heard Hein mutter.

"Wait and see!"

Then it became really dangerous. On the upswing, the four split up, two swung to the left, two curved to the right. They wanted to tackle us. Remembering the lessons at their fighter pilot school.

"Watch out, it could get dicey now!" Hein hurried out. The warning was justified, but superfluous, we all knew that.

"Hunters from the right!"

"Hunters from the left!"

They approached us from both sides. One pack from the top right, the other from the bottom left.

Again we did a roll, followed by two or three torn turns. Hein didn't need to prove that he could fly, this was a top performance. The blood drained from my head. I seemed to have lead in my legs, again I clung to the handles. Two Iwans came up close behind the tail unit, less than fifty meters away. I pulled through and fired for all I was worth. My sheaf was lying well.

"Where are they now?"

"I don't see them!"

"Hein, do you see them?"

"No, but keep your eyes open!"

"Damn, I can't see anything, where are they?" Werner called out helplessly. I looked up. Shadows flitted across the sun. Then they came. The

falcons wanted to hit an already tired pigeon, but we didn't give up that easily.

"Watch out, they're coming out of the sun!"

Fire flashed from the muzzles of our machine guns again. The first dived into the shower of sparks from the tracer, the second followed. They could no longer dodge at this speed. A shadow from the left. I was almost paralyzed with shock. Barely 100 meters behind us, a bulky radial engine, like the head of an angry hornet, appeared above the tail unit. Above the engine was the reflective glow of the glass cockpit, above it the white cross of the tail unit. It must have had us directly in its sights.

"Hunter, back right," I shouted. The bright flashes of his weapons flashed. The tracer raced towards us. Hein managed to pull the plane slightly to the right, then the blows of a huge hammer crashed down on us. Explosions on the tail unit. Our brave "mill" roared in every joint.

In a long right-hand bend, we "smeared" away. The ground was getting closer and closer.

"Hein, what's wrong?"

"The machine is out of trim, we must have hits."

We were still pushing towards the ground over the right-hand side. Another 500 m, another 300 m, then the plane gradually began to straighten up and banked to the left. Hein carefully rocked the wings. The horizon calmed down. Slowly he intercepted the bird.

"If they catch us now, it's our turn!"

We feverishly searched the sky.

"I don't see them anymore!"

"Nothing is happening with me either," shouted Werner.

"They seem to have left!"

The snow beneath us was blinding. Drenched in sweat, I straightened up. I tightened the lock on the cupola and secured the machine gun. My legs were paralyzed. Werner had also straightened up. I carefully dropped back into my seat. I leaned against the bulkheads as if gripped by a severe fever. I was completely exhausted. The tremendous circulatory strain of the cornering struggle, which I had only been able to cope with half-standing with the utmost effort, almost knocked me over. "Scraps of sheet metal are sticking up from the tail unit," Werner reported. I turned around. Only gradually was I able to organize my thoughts, then I saw the mess. Frayed pieces of sheet metal were sticking up from the elevator and tailplane.

"Look at the area on the left!"

"Damn, they really got us!"

Just outside the tail boom, the left wing was torn open almost across its entire width. Jagged pieces of sheet metal were sticking out in all directions.

"Can you still hold the machine?"

"So far, yes. The tank doesn't seem to have been hit. The aileron hangs, but I can hold it back. It looks worse with the elevator, I can't deflect it more than 20-30 degrees. I can't risk using force. Werner, put your glider on as a precaution."

He reacted immediately and deployed his chest parachute. When it came down to it, we had to be able to get out quickly.

"Damn, the red lamp!"

I stared ahead. Sure enough, the red warning light came on. Maliciously, it seemed to me, as if to say: "Now see how you can do it."

"We can't afford any more big tricks on the approach. The space must be cleared immediately."

I pushed the seat back with both legs and switched to "send".

"Elbe from Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Elbe, have heavy hits in tail unit and wing. Red warning light is on. When we are over the field, have the runway cleared."

"Berta-Kurfürst, you have understood. Will be arranged immediately. We'll keep our fingers crossed for you. Break a leg!"

"Elbe, report on last order: Column north of Schigry consists of own formations. Tops of the Soviets are still north-east of Krasnaya Polyana."

"Thank you, I understand."

Another call.

"Berta-Kurfürst von Ulan, please come!"

Who was that? I thought for a moment, then I remembered the code name. It was the newly arrived 4th Pz. Div. What did the comrades want from us?

"Ulan von Berta-Kurfürst, come in, please."

"Berta-Kurfürst, we have observed your air battle. The whole staff wishes you a safe return home. Break a leg!"

"Thanks, Ulan, it'll be fine."

Indistinct, the voice of a distant radio operator in the headphones. His call was masked by strong background noise.

"Berta-Kurfürst, are you still listening? Berta-Kurfürst, are you still listening?" "This is Berta-Kurfürst, who is speaking?"

Then more clearly the voice of the radio operator at VII AK.

"Here, Oder, break a leg from us too. I hope you make it. Over and out!"

"Thank you, Or. Special thanks to you. Our thoughts are also with you. Over and out!"

What kind of people were they? Even with their heads full of worries and hardship, they still took an interest in our fate. In a desperate situation, they still found a word of sympathy for us. We could be proud, they were our comrades.

Everyone thought about what to do if we had to "get out". Werner had come to the front. We stared at the instruments.

"Hein, course 240°, we're a little too far north." "Understood!"

Pushing carefully to the side, he corrected the course.

"12 minutes to go."

He looked over at me skeptically. The stopwatch ran relentlessly.

"Should be good enough if we can get into the square straight away."

We no longer had eyes for the airspace around us, for the glowing snowfields down there. We had even forgotten the azure sky. We had also forgotten that danger still threatened from there.

Our plane had suddenly become a living being, a comrade, whom we cheered up, whom we insulted.

"Don't you dare hold out, damn coffee grinder," threatened one of them.

"You could drink a little less gas," the next one asked lovingly.

"If you put your ears on, you'll have it wrong with me ....", the last one.

Basically, we were simply afraid. Only in fear does man forget his own self. He clings to saving "straws", even clings to dead metal as if it were part of his life. As long as the uncertainty, the fear of what is to come, holds us captive, our entire human behavior becomes a revelation. We turn our innermost selves inside out, we scream and cry, we shout and rage and yet find no way out of this terrible confusion. Time seems to stand still. Seconds and minutes pass and become eternity. You call out to the gods, you invoke your father and mother and yet you are left alone with yourself. We stared at the fuel gauge and the stopwatch as if they were the measure of all things, as if we could read from their glassy eyes the degree of hope that our steely companion still afforded us. The many instruments of our good "mill" became a face in which every thing had its meaning, its place. We stared at them, as one looks into the face of a comrade in the hour of danger, in order to recognize in this mirror of his soul whether at least he still believes in the chain.

The many pointers and scales, compass, "horizon" and turn indicators,

cables and wires suddenly became a nervous system that reflected and passed on to us the impulses flowing into our steel bird from all sides. What just a few minutes ago was nothing more than an aircraft, a masterful product of steel and aluminum, was humanized and became an object of loving tenderness.

Every change in engine speed, every sound from the furthest corners of the fuselage and wings was followed with the utmost attention, as if it were a matter of interpreting changes in one's own pulse rate.

The essence of fear, it seems to me, is that man no longer considers himself to be the center of the universe. In fear, his sense of superiority disappears. Fear takes away his power.

A person who has never felt the racing pulse of fear does not know how to fit into the fabric of nature, does not know how small and insignificant he is in the face of creation. It is unimportant where man believes his place is in this world. What is important is that he is able to recognize that he is one of the countless living beings on this earth.

What use was it to think about whether this war made sense, whether it was the work of the devil or of an almighty God? Filled with doubts, we fly to the edge of the universe and collide once again with an incomprehensible infinity. We fly in the deep dark night, accompanied by the mild light of countless stars, and ask ourselves again and again: "Where is the end of this world?"

In fear, one senses how narrow the boundaries of human existence are. One also senses that one's own death cannot be an end. In fear, the pain disappears, all feeling disappears in response to the one question: "What is life?"

Full of anxiety, our eyes wandered out to the wing. Would it hold, would it survive the stress of the landing approach? Will it tear off under the changed air pressure when the flaps are extended? Will we still have time to rescue ourselves from the plane, which is falling to the ground like a withered leaf? Shouldn't I give the order to bail out after all?

Involuntarily, everyone fumbled for their parachute harnesses, checked the fit of the latch, looked again and again for the lever to release the flap.

Finally, a gray spot appeared in the bright glow of the snow: Kursk. Will we still reach the place? The engines were running smoothly. Oil pressure and temperature remained stable. Hein flew at the lowest possible speed so as not to put unnecessary strain on the wing and tail unit. I kept checking the condition of the left tail boom, where there was also a palm-sized hole, but

what about the outside? Were there any pieces hanging off there too?

A white-gray shadow appears.

"Hunter", I can still shout, then the machine is diagonally above us. Werner is at his machine gun in one movement. On the fuselage is a large crossbar, a Mel09. A weight falls from our hearts. The pilot waves over. We wave back. If only you had come sooner, comrade. Even now we are grateful for the escort. He accompanies us in wide curves. The first houses become recognizable. The hangars, the airplanes at the edge of the runway and the airfield.

"Elbe from Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Berta-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Elbe, we'll be at the airfield in a few minutes, please contact flight control."

"Berta-Kurfürst, question: Do you do belly landings?"

Hein had been listening in. I switch to "EiV".

"Tell him I'll decide that during the landing approach. If extending the flaps worsens the flight attitude, I'll leave the landing gear in."

"Elbe by Berta-Kurfürst, airplane pilot decides on landing approach."

"Understood, the fire department has been notified. Sanka is at the runway. Break a leg!"

We were hanging just above the railroad line, at an altitude of just under 200 meters. Diagonally left below us was the small wooded area to the east of the airfield. The traffic on the roads seemed to have multiplied since take-off. Just as the approaching danger can be recognized by the commotion in the anthill, an extraterrestrial creature would have deduced the extent of the danger threatening them from the commotion of the people down there. Wherever you looked, everything was in motion, a seemingly inexplicable to and fro of vehicles of all kinds on the crowded streets.

Finally the runway below us. The parked airplanes at the edge of the field. A squadron of Ju 87s took off in flock formation. I had prepared three rounds of red flare ammunition. I opened the flare gun, loaded it and pulled the trigger. The small red fireball sank down, glowing brightly. A few seconds later, a red flare rose up from the square, followed in quick succession by two more. While we flew along the northern edge of the field, I fired the remaining cartridges. Hein took off far to the northwest. Barely 150 meters up, we were hovering over the houses of the city and the hustle and bustle of countless vehicles, the restless confusion of countless people. Our escort fighter said goodbye and wobbled past us. It was too bad that we couldn't establish radio contact with him. The frequency range of the equipment didn't

allow it. One of the many "ingenious" problem solutions of our air force.

"Buckle up!" Hein ordered.

Werner crawled backwards. I secured my seat and fastened the seat belts. Over the eastern edge of the city, light gusts of wind shook us. If only the bird could stand it! I stared spellbound at the left wing.

"So, now a quick prayer, I'll extend the landing flaps."

A slight bobbing, the machine lifted slightly, the indicator lamp lit up, the flaps were in their final position. Nothing moved.

"That's it, now the chassis!"

A slight roar, a short jolt followed by a slight bump, the indicator light for the landing gear lit up.

"Berta-Kurfürst, your undercarriage is extended."

"Thank you, Elbe, everything is working so far."

Hein became nervous.

"The elevator is jammed."

The runway in front of us was empty. Hein approached the landing cross with a little more speed than usual. He could no longer take any great risks. What could not be corrected with the elevator, he tried to compensate with the throttle. He did an excellent job. If the plane had sagged with too little speed, a crash would have been unavoidable. The landing cross came closer and closer. I saw the fire department getting underway. The ambulance followed. Carefully pushed on. Throttle off. We came up a few meters behind the landing cross, jumped up a little and touched down again. We had too much speed, Hein couldn't get the tail unit to the ground quickly enough. It wasn't until we were in the middle third of the runway that the tailplane simply tipped over. The tail wheel whirled up millions of tiny ice crystals. When Hein pressed the brakes, the mill began to slide. So we had a stronger crosswind than expected.

As soon as we had rolled out, the fire engines were standing next to us, their Tetra extinguishers pointed at the machine. But nothing moved, everything remained calm.

For a moment, I was unable to move. Exhausted, I sank down on the seat. I managed to pull open the boarding flap, then I threw up. Nobody moved. Only after a while did I hear Werner throw off his seat belt and open his boarding hatch. I still couldn't move, my legs were paralyzed. I looked out helplessly.

Karl jumped onto the surface.

"Are you wounded, Lieutenant?"

"No, no. Please help me up."

A paramedic came up with me. They both tried to pull me up. I slowly got to my feet. I took deep breaths of fresh air. It brought life back to my limbs.

I carefully felt my way down from the wing. Werner and Karl helped me out of the parachute harness. Neither of us could get a word out. We patted each other on the shoulders as if to say: "Another lucky escape!"

Together with the control rooms and mechanics, we looked at the "mess". In the left wing, on a width of about two meters, two holes through which you could easily stick a head, scattered five hits of an overweight MG, holes as big as a fist. Scraps were hanging from the aft edge of the aileron. Miraculously, neither the spars nor the control cables were damaged. A cannon hit in the left tail boom, a hole on the outside the size of a roasting pan. The tail unit looked a mess. A cannon hit in the horizontal stabilizer, 4 hits from a super-heavy machine gun scattered over the rudder and fin. It was understandable that Hein had difficulties with the elevator. If he hadn't literally jerked to the right at the last second when the fighter came up behind us, we would have been completely hit and probably torn to shreds. Once again, we had a guardian angel.

Thoughtfully, I stroked the sheet metal of the tail unit support with my hand.

"Now you've been hit too," I said wistfully, more to myself. That was certainly the end of our good AK + BK, which had become a part of our own self in so many enemy flights. It no longer seemed possible to repair it, so all that remained was to "cannibalize" it and blow up the rest.

Without saying a word, we got into a VW bucket and drove to the command post.

We were not worried and desperate because we had survived the battle - despite the loss of a valuable aircraft we were not the defeated ones - we were desperate in the realization that even obedience to our own conscience, that self-understanding of our inner command could not change the fact that this army was defeated. Our deep concern at that hour was for those men who were staring at the sky 120 km to the east, waiting for help.

Well, on its own, this flight was a success. We were able to carry out and complete a mission. We were able to gain insights into the enemy's intentions, which could form the basis of new decisions for our command. Decisions that meant the continued existence of the army, but could hardly become the basis for new victories. We had successfully repelled the attack of enemy hunters and yet we felt so much like wounded game, which, left alone by its pack, seeks shelter in the impenetrable thicket of a forest.

This flight had brought the certainty that this army was no longer the one with which we had once reached the banks of the Don. The enemy saw our weakness and exploited it, just as we had exploited his weakness years before.

With small tank packs, he ruthlessly drove our infantry in front of him, fighting for his own villages as if they were empty cardboard boxes thrown into the landscape. Our front resembled a sieve through which the enemy no longer seeped but flowed, causing ever new confusion and panic. He skillfully severed the nerve cords that connected the leadership and the troops, causing collapse after collapse. The enemy was no longer confronted by a front of fighters determined to do anything, but by wandering wagon trains fighting on all sides, seeking to join up with larger formations.

There was not much time left to break the ring that the Red Army was threatening to put around our divisions. Once they succeeded in breaking out, there was no stopping them. Then the men, determined to do anything, made their way westwards and swept the enemy aside like the flood of a broken dam.

Immortal is the one who succeeds in returning this tide to the flow of a rushing army.

July 3, 1943, exhausted, I lay in the shade of a bush and stared up at the pristine blue sky. Swallows were flying as fast as arrows. On the nearby front, the noise of battle had subsided. The midday heat flickered over the sparse green of our field airfield near a sugar factory.

Having only been back from the military hospital for a few days, I could feel the weakness in my limbs. I had opened my blouse and tunic wide. I was in danger of falling asleep from tiredness. I thought again about this morning's mission. Everyone could feel the immense tension, stretched to breaking point, that lay over the front lines. In the few weeks I had been away, the battle had changed completely, the opponents had torn into each other, the fronts had hardened. Each was waiting for a careless move by the other to strike the final fatal blow.

It had become almost impossible for us to penetrate deeper than 50 km into the enemy's rear area. If we had still been able to evade the furious fire of the light and medium anti-aircraft guns, we were defenceless against the lightning-fast raids by entire swarms of Soviet fighters. A number of new models had appeared, including a clear replica of our German He 100 in the MIG series. Almost without exception, machines that were technically on a par with our aircraft. Only the short, inadequate training of the pilots gave us

a chance again and again.

Our situation had become particularly difficult because it was only possible in exceptional cases to move our fighters for escort duties in the depths of the enemy hinterland. This morning we also had to give up our attempt to reach Obojan. The murderous anti-aircraft fire separated us after only a few minutes from a flock of Me 109s, which retreated to higher altitudes. Over Pavlovka we were then confronted by a swarm of MIG-3s, which we had difficulty evading. The "comrades" only left us in the area of the army's quad flak.

The army's watchful anti-aircraft gunners increasingly became our last resort. The Iwans had a great deal of respect for their guns and usually retreated immediately. We envied the neighboring reconnaissance groups, some of which had already been converted to "single-seat" reconnaissance and flew the Me109 and the Fw 190. The sensitivity to fire of both types was probably the reason why the losses of these squadrons were higher than our own. On the day of my return, two aircraft were missing in the Kursk area. We also had to take part in the search. They remained missing.

Other squadrons had received the Me109 and the Me210, but these units also had problems. The Me210 proved to be a technical failure that led to considerable downtime. After a few months, this type had to be withdrawn from front-line service; it was replaced by the Me410. However, very few pilots really mastered this excellent aircraft. We had the consolation that we had fewer losses despite the inferior Fw 189. This may have been partly due to the long experience - most of us had between 500 and 800 flying hours on this type - and partly to the fact that the Fw189 was very maneuverable despite its lower speed. However, I was convinced that the decisive factor was that six eyes see more than just two or four. This was a safety factor that should not be underestimated, especially with a well-coordinated crew. I knew more in just a few weeks. Despite my somewhat fragile health, I was given the prospect of continuing my pilot training.

I must have been asleep for a few minutes when I heard the voice of Sergeant Heimbach - my comrade Kurt Sickert's gunner - looking for me.

I called him:

"Hello Hans, here I am!"

"We're looking for you everywhere. Haven't you eaten? You should come to the boss immediately!"

Still a little groggy, I stood up.

"To be honest, I wasn't hungry. I'll come with you in a minute."

"But that's wrong, with your stomach problem you should eat less, but

more often."

The medical student spoke from him, but also genuine camaraderie. We got on well. We had been transferred to this squadron together almost ten months ago.

"Thanks Hans, but what's actually going on?"

"I don't know either. Apparently one of the air liaison officers wants something from you."

It could only be the enemy flight this morning. I went through all the details of the flight again in my mind. The analysis of the film had not revealed any new information. So what was it all about?

During my absence, the bosses had changed. Captain Lunze had replaced Captain Berthold, who wanted to be transferred back to the army. I had lost a boss who had been a real friend to me. I had read the few lines of the letter he had written to me in the military hospital over and over again. It was a pity that I couldn't say goodbye to him myself. Somehow I sensed that it was to be a farewell forever.

Lunze, a slim, almost gaunt type, was of a completely different nature. Taciturn and always lost in thought, many people considered him to be outgoing. But by God he wasn't. It simply wasn't his style to be ingratiating. He not only observed the war, he also observed people from an innate distance. I knew him from the time before the war when he was a lieutenant in Reconnaissance Group 14. Because of the many shared memories, the many comrades we had experienced, we got into conversation more quickly than was usual with him. Somehow I liked him. I didn't always like overly brash types either. He had one decisive advantage over Berthold: he was a mature aviation officer with an excellent sense of what was feasible and possible. He would never have asked for something pointless or unreasonable.

"Captain, you sent for me?"

Lunze looked at me thoughtfully.

"Man, where have you been? Are you not feeling well?"

"Thanks, I'm not quite up to speed yet, but I'm all right!" "The air liaison officer with the II SS Panzer Corps has called. You are to attend a meeting in Borissowka. The group and FlieVO 2nd Army have agreed. Take the "Storch", but don't stay there long. You know there's a lot in the air."

"I'm signing off, Captain."

A quick look at the map to see if anything had changed in the locations of the refreshment stands. I picked up some snacks at the field kitchen and we

were ready to go. The "Storch" was warmed up.

To protect ourselves from surprises, we stayed at a good distance from the front and far south of the Sumy-Belgorod railroad line. Flying a few meters above the ground, we skipped over hedges and trees. We had to be careful, because IL-2s and La-5s had been constantly circling around in the front area for several days. In the rear area of the corps, there was calm before the storm. Hardly any movement on the roads. Work on vehicles and tanks in some villages. The troops made final preparations. In a wooded area southeast of Soldatskoye, well camouflaged tank positions. The Landser waved

up to us. Further east, heavy massing of light and heavy flak. Towards Belgorod, the deployment of tanks, assault guns and armored personnel carriers increased. I saw the "Tiger" from the air for the first time. The outlines were striking and impossible to mistake. As we turned onto Borissovka, we flew over countless batteries of heavy artillery. Unfortunately, the camouflage was not always good from the air. We quickly found the Stork landing site. The aviation liaison officer was waiting for me and took me to the command post in a VW bucket.

"What's up?"

"A small briefing, to which the airmen of the neighboring corps have also been called in. The Ic officers are having problems."

"Why was I requested?"

"I don't know, apparently you have a big number with them."

I remembered: the armored divisions "Leibstandarte" and "Das Reich" succeeded in stopping the advance of the Red Army in the Kharkov area at the end of February. The "Großdeutschland" division was able to recapture Lebedin from Akhtyrka. Berthold had immediately sent me to Lebedin with two crews to ensure better reconnaissance on the flank of the shock wedge. It was also thanks to our efforts that the counterattack could be carried out so quickly and Kharkov was quickly recaptured. Sometimes this was appreciated. At least it did not seem to have been forgotten.

The forward command post was a hive of activity. Radio stations were set up, telecommunications cables laid and new telephone connections built.

An Obersturmbannführer greeted me. An officer from our neighboring squadron was also present. In a small map room, the situation was briefly explained and the intentions and objectives of the 4th Panzer Army. On the right wing was the army detachment Kempf with the z.b.V.- AK Raus and

the III. armored corps. This was followed by the center shock grouping with the II SS Panzer Corps and the XLVIII Panzer Corps. On the left wing was the LIL AK. The XXIV Pz. Corps remained an army reserve, a unit that had not yet recovered from the shock of January. Around the attack area, the enemy had recognized the 7th Guards Army, the 69th Army, 1st Panzer Army, 6th Gd. Army and the 40th Army.

Thoughtfully, I looked at the enemy situation map and mentally transferred the observations of my flight today. Apparently my behavior had been misinterpreted.

"Is anything unclear to you?"

"Not at all, Obersturmbannführer. However, your map does not show the latest results of the aerial reconnaissance. It does not show the strong field fortification line around Obojan, nor the tank positions we recognized this morning west of Obojan, in the Pawlanka and Peschanoje area. The Ivan has also gathered forces of considerable strength northeast of the SS armored corps' attack strip. I also regret that you make so little use of the good aerial plans."

"That's why we brought you here. The corps have a few worries. One is the fact that front-line reconnaissance has revealed that the Soviets have regrouped their forces again in the last few days. Listening posts reported strong movements in the enemy rear tonight. Apparently complete radio silence has been ordered. On the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that the Soviets are preparing a relief attack. The air fleet reports that a downed officer spoke of the concentration of strong forces."

The air liaison officer of the 4th Pz. army, a captain, intervened:

"Colonel General Hoth believes that confirmation of these observations by aerial reconnaissance is urgently required. I have suggested flying over the battlefield today before nightfall. One squadron will take over the section between Belgorod and Kharkov. Your squadron the left wing, including the frontal arc around Belgorod."

I almost said: "How little Moritz imagines it." But I held my tongue.

"Captain, do you understand what this demand means? Crews from my squadron have flown six missions today. In all 1 of them we experienced unprecedented air defense. We were hunted like rabbits. Even with fighter protection, things didn't work out. May I make a suggestion?"

"Yes, please."

"Such a mission must be thoroughly prepared. I only expect it to be successful if the mission is carried out at low altitude. The 'comrades' over there are not asleep. They'll immediately pounce on the reconnaissance

aircraft. They know what's at stake. The mission should be coordinated with smaller relief attacks by units of Air Fleet 6, with free hunting by our fighters. This would concentrate the attention of the air defense on the northern edge of the front for some time."

"Good, agreed. I'll discuss it with the air corps. You will report to your boss as soon as you return. Otherwise, strictest silence."

After discussing the main points and clarifying the final details, we were seen off. We flew back to the squadron.

No special expertise was needed to recognize the close connection between the situation at home and the situation at the front.

Comrades had brought bad news from home. They described the cruel force of the first heavy air raids on major German cities, the firestorm after the bombing of Hamburg. Visions of horror that depressed us all. We felt the loss of confidence in the Luftwaffe not only among the civilian population, but also - and this hurt us far more - among the troops.

The complete miscalculation of the enemy's strength and its personnel and technical capabilities - here in the East as well - had a devastating effect. I kept remembering the comments on the situation made by the Romanian Lieutenant Colonel Cristea. How right this man was! What I personally found particularly bitter was the recognizable inability of the Luftwaffe leadership - despite the gigantic personnel expenditure in the RLM and Technical Office - to cope with the increasingly pressing problems of streamlining and coordinating aircraft construction. In the fourth year of the war, a lot of personnel were still tinkering with aircraft models that were never expected to be used. Above all, it seemed incomprehensible to us younger people that it should be impossible for the Luftwaffe General Staff to draw the necessary conclusions for air warfare from a clear assessment of the air situation. Although great successes were achieved, it had become impossible to destroy a large Soviet aircraft factory located only 320 km behind the front. This was discussed everywhere in the air force. However, no results were forthcoming.

Looking at the air warfare of the last few days alone - since my return from the military hospital - I am deeply convinced that no special "strategic" skills were required to make the right decisions and then enforce them with all available means. Focusing on the deployment of the few, still fully intact units would have produced results that would have meant a noticeable relief for the fighting troops.

There were two fighter squadrons circling around the area, and yet it had

not been possible - despite two missions carried out with much advance praise - to destroy the Kursk railroad station in the long term. Dive bomber and fighter-bomber squadrons "drove around" in the enemy's hinterland without even being able to disrupt the Red Army's advance. A "cheerful" hunt was organized for the few daytime trains and dances of joy were performed when one was hit. Three hours later, when a reconnaissance plane flew by and took pictures of the effects, operations resumed as if nothing had happened. When, weeks earlier, we suggested attacking the Liski railroad junction in the small Don bend on the basis of our reconnaissance results and also destroying the bridges over the Don, this suggestion was met with a skeptical shake of the head; just as if a major attack on London were to be carried out. A Soviet lieutenant pilot who had been shot down reported the concentration of strong flying units in the Voronezh area; but apart from a few jamming attacks, nothing happened.

I received a severe rebuke in February when I criticized the use of the Ju88 to fight tanks. Degrading such an expensive aircraft to a Pak seemed to me to be the pinnacle of misguided Luftwaffe leadership. This example showed best how much the Luftwaffe lacked its own concepts and was increasingly degraded to an auxiliary force of the army. This inevitably meant that the Air Force's own specific ideas were neglected.

The support requirements by the army and the deployment orders for the flying units complemented each other in a remarkable way.

"A heavy Soviet battery is shooting into my position, I need Stukas."

"Fly over there and put a few eggs in Ivan's basket."

One hour after the company:

"They're still shooting!"

"Understood, we'll try again."

When we tried again, the following day of course, the same result. A non-commissioned officer observer of the air reconnaissance would have known better. First precise target reconnaissance, then deployment. We all knew how difficult it was to destroy a battery from the air. Regardless of this, the Iwans were masters at setting up false and evasive positions. In countless cases we were able to prove that the wrong position had been attacked in the first instance. A well-conducted aerial bombardment would usually have sufficed.

During the flight back I had a lot of time to think about these problems. Despite the constant efforts of some of my immediate superiors, the army command was unable to realize that success in the coming battle depended on one essential prerequisite: the air force's cutting off the battle area as a

result of gaining air superiority over the battlefield and in the depths of space. The use of flying units as a support weapon for the armored corps was bound to end in failure.

The numerically impressive successes of the fighters in shooting down enemy aircraft and the successes of the fighter planes in destroying them - at the cost of heavy personnel and material losses - deceived the leadership and the population about the true state of the Luftwaffe. This led to fatal conclusions, which then had catastrophic consequences.

What gave me much more food for thought, however, was the reference to the regroupings and concentrations of Soviet army units that had been recognized in the last few days. The more I thought about this assumption, the more I suspected that the Red Army leadership knew our intentions and plans. This was the third time in the course of the war that I had been directly confronted with such grave suspicions. During the morning flight I had also noticed the heavy concentration of enemy formations in front of the 4th Pz. army and especially in front of the II SS Pz. corps. In the frontal arc around Belgorod, the positions were almost 50 km deep. Trench system followed trench system, cleverly camouflaged and only recognizable after thorough aerial photo analysis. I could not help thinking that the Soviets were forming a "hollow alley" in the direction of Obojan. Was treachery involved here? The suspicion did not seem so unfounded to me.

The accounts given by comrades during a short vacation in Bucharest seemed almost unbelievable to me, and yet there was no doubting the truth. During the dismantling of a Romanian spy ring by the "Siguranta", documents had been found that indicated the involvement of Germans in the highest positions. The traitors had leaked the most precise documents on the German-Romanian exchange of goods to the British Intelligence Service and the Russians. Lists of the exact volume of Romanian oil deliveries, overviews of German arms deliveries for the Romanian Wehrmacht, reports on the position of Romanian and German units on the Eastern Front. The highlight, however, was precise data on the organization and structure of the German air defence for the protection of the oil area, which could only have come from the armoury of a higher German command office.

However, I was stunned by the stories told by Mr. Sommer and Richard Ludrowsky when we sat together for a small reunion drink. The investigation into a racketeering affair with an intelligence background was set in motion by a report from the Afrika Korps, which I initially thought was a bad joke,

but which relatives who were themselves involved in the investigation could only confirm.

During the advance of Afrika Korps units on El Alamein, large supplies of fuel were captured from a British depot, including several hundred barrels of lubricating oil with the inscription "German Air Force Mission Romania" stamped on them. This incident led to a large-scale operation by the Gestapo and SD. The investigations revealed that a load of lubricating oil destined for the Luftwaffe, loaded on a Danube tow train, had been held up in Hungary due to a transport twist, turned around and routed to Turkey. The Turkish recipient company, which also did business with the British, did not even bother to decant the barrels and forwarded them "as is" to the British Expeditionary Force without much fuss.

Anger, even impotent rage, rose up in me when I thought of some of the arrogant types in officer's coats, as I had recently experienced in Bucharest, but also in some staffs on the Eastern Front. While thousands of officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted men on the front were laying down their lives in exemplary sacrifice, these gentlemen were making a nice life for themselves with Crimean champagne and caviar, lobsters and oysters. It was as if the sacrifice of the front-line soldiers was a kind of cabaret. They practiced betrayal, outdid each other in scolding the "Sch ... -Adolf", made stupid and unqualified remarks about the "greatest leader of all time", "GröFaZ" for short, but did not shy away from being awarded high and highest medals by this very "GröFaZ". Strange characters, it seemed to me, who fumed about the "criminality" of this war, but had no qualms about doing everything they could, through the ruthless use of their soldiers, to quickly gain possession of such medals, the award certificate of which bore the signature of the man they hated so much.

However, there was an explosion when I once dared to say that not even 20 percent of the soldiers were deployed at the front or belonged to front-line units. One very "duty-conscious" person even considered this to be a highly defeatist statement. There was a shocked silence when General Ritter von Greim said that this was not so far off the mark. He would have guessed 15 percent. So what was really behind the talk of "total war"?

Immediately after landing, detonations made us sit up and take notice. Heavy shells hit east-northeast of our airfield. After a few minutes, a fierce artillery duel was underway. That was annoying, because the shots came from exactly

the direction I had chosen for our course. It could have been the heavy gun battery that was close to the north of Miropolje and at which I had carried out an aerial shootout only the day before yesterday. One more example of how difficult it was to destroy such a position. It was not at all clear to me how the Russians achieved such good shooting results, because they rarely used aerial observers. Did they perhaps even smuggle their artillery observers behind our lines? Did partisans take over this task? Radio reconnaissance had occasionally expressed this suspicion.

We had fired with an experienced 10.5 cm gun battery. The shooting was preceded by a thorough target discussion and aerial photo evaluation. This eliminated the need for a long search. The Ivan had prepared two camouflage positions and an evasive position for this battery.

During the approach I realized that the evasive position had been taken during the night. In order to give the battery enough time to enter the new values into the basic gun, we withdrew and approached again. After a few minutes the battery reported:

"Done!"

"Fire at will."

Contrary to the method used in the past, the soldiers did not fire a squadron salvo, but only fired with the basic gun, probably to save ammunition.

"Attention, fired!"

Hein was heading straight for the finish line.

"Watch out, watch out, watch out, impact!"

Shortly before the target, the fire of the impact twitched and a clearly visible cloud of explosions spread out. Contrary to the usual artillery aiming method, we reported the distance and lateral deviation in meters when shooting from the air.

"Two hundred short, one hundred left."

"Shoot trial group immediately!"

We turned back and flew in again.

"Trial group ready."

"Fire at will."

"Attention, fired."

"Watch out, watch out, impact!"

They were experts in their field and the rehearsal group was only a few meters away.

"Fifty meters too far."

"Understood, effect shooting."

We stayed above the battery. The following groups were in the middle of

the finish line. A fantastic firing spell began. Several stacks of ammunition flew into the air. The result after perhaps 15 groups: they were firing again today. As we could see, not bad. Black smoke was rising in the north. Fuel was on fire.

As suddenly as the fire had started, it stopped after a few minutes. Over there, everything was wide awake, which was bad for us.

The chief was waiting for me in the squadron command post. I reported the content and course of the meeting and presented the request of the 4th Pz. army. He agreed to my proposal without hesitation.

"Do you feel all right? I don't want you to collapse again in a few days. You should take it easy!"

"Thank you, Captain, don't worry, I'll be fine."

"You'll have to choose another gunner. Godhusen had to stand in for another crew."

"That's a pity! Can I have Corporal Heimbach?"

"When do you want to start?"

"6:45 p.m., Captain."

"Good, that's fine. Lie down and get some more rest. You'll still need steady nerves."

On the way to my tent, I informed Hein Holzhey, who was not exactly pleased about the new deployment, then I told Heimbach that everything should be ready to go by 18:15.

I met the other officers of the squadron at the makeshift coffee table. They had heard about the mission. Lieutenant Gerth flattered me:

"I guess you haven't had enough of this morning. You're probably not getting enough iron in your back."

"You do the thing!"

"God forbid, I'm not tired of living!"

I didn't doubt for a second that he would have stepped in immediately if I hadn't been fit for duty.

A few months later, after returning from an enemy flight, he breathed his last in the arms of his gunner, shot to death. No one could escape his fate. Some of us had tears running down our faces when he was lifted out of the plane, including me. He remained one of those men who would accompany me in my thoughts for the rest of my life. With whom I still had many a conversation in my memory. He simply remained what he was: *a comrade*.

I threw myself into the straw in the tent. But sleep was out of the question,

even though I could feel the paralyzing weakness that the illness had left in my body. In peace, I would probably have had to say goodbye to flying for months. But now, at the height of the war, nobody - least of all myself - thought of taking it easy on me. I simply had to get through it, just as I had overcome the consequences of the serious flying accident the previous year.

I began to listen to myself, to feel the pain that had been with me for weeks. Where was the solution to the "illness" puzzle that the doctors couldn't find? It was no longer the everyday pain of a hollow tooth, which would have made little impression on me. It was the feeling that I had somehow been struck to the core. Strange enough, for it was not the first time that I had felt so powerless. Often enough I had been shaken down by a severe fever, but this time it was different. I felt that the illness of the body was also threatening to become an illness of the soul, and I rebelled against it. My own body seemed to be slipping away from my will, seemed to want to evade the rule of my will, and that could not be. The realization of hopelessness, the constantly repeated attempt to rebel against a seemingly unalterable fate, the futile attempt to help change things, made me ill. Simply resigning myself to an unalterable fate did not suit me. Doesn't a person shaken by fever bear all the signs of the war raging within him? Isn't war an outward sign of a humanity shaken by fever? Is war not a form of illness in our human life? But if war is nothing other than illness, where is the giant who can cure it?

Holzhey and Heimbach picked me up at 6.00 pm. The sun was still high above the horizon. Once its disk turned to glow, it quickly became night and we had no time to lose. Hein helped me into the combination. Had I forgotten anything? Bracelet compass, emergency rations, pilot's scarf, map board, pistol, everything was there. We collected our parachutes from the parachute trolley and went over to the command post. Everyone had their thoughts. We knew what was coming. One person's thoughts might say a silent prayer, another might have a last conversation with his father and mother, the third might tenderly stroke the face of his beloved wife, but we remained silent.

We were discussing the final details of the flight at the chart table when the boss entered:

"Well, how are you going to turn this thing?"

"The suspected movements and deployments can only be recognized when flying low. The lighting is no longer sufficient for aerial photography. This means we are rid of one problem and can concentrate fully on the flight."

"You may be right. What's next?"

"We are flying at an angle of about 30 degrees to the front. I will remain on 'transmit'<sup>1</sup> at all times and transmit all information immediately. The radio stations of the air liaison officers and the divisions should constantly switch to "receive" so that there is no interruption. Up to a distance of approx. 50 km we can be heard even when flying low.

We fly from Sumy towards Miropolje and immediately dive down into the Psel depression, initially staying on the southern edge of the depression, then change to the northern edge and fly over Beloje-Penskiy-Pavlovka-Uslan, passing south of Obojan. Stay east of the Obojan- Belgorod road and then try to fly out between Teterinowo and Prokrowka near Beresow. According to my experience this morning, the last stretch will probably be the most difficult, because along the road there is anti-aircraft battery after anti-aircraft battery. Has the Air Corps ordered relief missions?"

"Yes, Stukas will attack the Lgowsky station at the top of the Sejm at around 19:15. A fighter squadron - accompanied by fighters - will approach Budanowka, west of Kursk. This will at least temporarily tie up the fighters in the northern part."

"Captain, we're signing off!"

Lunze looked at everyone for a long time, as if he wanted to memorize their faces one last time, and shook their hands.

"Take care, break a leg. I'll be on the radio myself."

The Technical Group had the AK + HK completed. One of the new machines. However, even "insiders" were not quite sure what the claimed improvements were. Allegedly, the main spar had been reinforced. Bad mouths said that new putty had been used for the windows. According to one "ondit", the machines were manufactured in a French factory. All the more reason to be suspicious.

While Hein let the machine warm up briefly, I checked the map again. All the recognized anti-aircraft positions were marked. The Fla-MGs and the light and medium anti-aircraft guns on self-propelled guns were an incalculable risk. These could change their positions quickly and appear practically anywhere.

The warm evening breeze brushed over the trees and bushes as if there was profound peace. Hein waved me over. Zippers closed. Parachute straps locked. FT canopy strapped down. Karl reported:

"Ready, lieutenant, you can go in."

"Thank you, Karl!"

"Take care!"

Again we fell silent. Everyone knew that there was no point in chasing

away this anxious feeling, the creeping fear, with flippant words and pretending that it was all just a wafer-thin veil that could be torn apart by a few superficially thrown words. Hein smirked. I looked at him questioningly.

"You weren't shaking!"

In fact, the "freezing" was gone. It wasn't there this morning either. Strange. What was the cause?

Brake pads gone. A quick wave. Hein rolled to the western edge of the square. Even now, maximum attention was required. The red fighters sometimes raced across the field at lightning speed. We were too close to the front.

Checking the radio:

"Elbe by Heinrich-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Heinrich-Kurfürst von Elbe. I understand you clearly, QSA 5, clear for take-off. Break a leg!"

Switch back to "EiV".

"Everything ready?"

"Done!"

"Got it. Hein, off through the middle!"

After a few hundred meters, the plane took off. I threw off the seat belts and pulled the seat forward as far as it would go. The long Heimbach lay down behind his twin MG in the "bag".

We turned slightly to the north and flew over the railroad line. Hein immediately pushed on again. We scurried a few meters over the roofs of the small houses on the northern edge of Sumy, then 60°. A battalion of infantry marched to the left and right of the road, spread far apart, towards the nearby front. The men waved their helmets and rifles. Hein wobbled across the fields in salute. Well-camouflaged positions of light and heavy field howitzers, with 2 cm quad anti-aircraft guns dug in behind them. Field fortifications, deeply staggered wire obstacles, trenches again, in between the gray-black stains of countless shell hits. We were above the front line.

"Stay as low as you can."

Hein nodded. Only a few centimeters seemed to separate us from the tops of the trees. Here and there, destroyed houses, burnt-out barns. Trees felled in the middle of the green meadows. Individual rifle nests with earth bunkers. It was still our own infantry. The field gray of the uniforms stood out clearly against the brown of the earth.

I switched to "Send":

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, front flown over."

Again a dense tangle of wire obstacles, again earth bunkers, anti-tank

obstacles made of rammed tree trunks, then we stared into the faces of the Iwans, who looked up at us in surprise. Some threw themselves into the trenches in a flash.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, field positions heavily occupied. Course for road junction west of Miropolje."

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, infantry in battalion strength on the march to the front. NW, N and NE Miropolje approx. 20 batteries of light and heavy artillery in position. South of the village positions of heavy grenade launchers."

The silence was becoming eerie. Had the surprise been so complete? Due to the extreme low-level flight, we were visibly faster than the alarm calls from the air observers could reach the individual troop units. We had not yet detected any defensive fire. In front of us were some riders in capes, colored ribbons on their caps, high-ranking officers. At any other time, we would have "lit them up". The horses reared up. We were so low that we could have knocked their caps off their heads.

"Stay close to the slope, there's a lot going on!"

Two, maybe three meters high, we sped along above the meadow. The tops of the trees on the wooded slopes seemed towering above us. On the slopes were countless well-developed bunker positions.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, well-developed and camouflaged bunker positions on the northern slopes east of Miropolje. Infantry positions in regimental strength. Cannon batteries with anti-aircraft protection in position to the west and east of the railroad line. Belitsa station, a train of approx. 30 G-wagons is unloaded. Course 45°, over to Beloje."

A small wood obscured our view for a moment, then the "magic" began. The muzzle flash of light twin flak flashed directly in front of us. The tracer bullets came at us like a shower of sparks. I involuntarily ducked my head as if I could find shelter in a ditch. Luckily for us, the sheaves were too high and crossed close behind us. Seconds later we were over the first houses of Beloje. The streets were teeming with soldiers.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, Beloje, three batteries of light anti-aircraft guns. Occupation with motorized vehicles. On the road to Penskiy a section of manned artillery, marching east. Prepared anti-tank obstacles."

Everywhere you looked, manned and motorized units were marching, generally in a south-easterly direction. A gun crew almost fell under their wheels in shock as they flew over.

A dense network of field and bunker positions on the slope to the Psel depression. If our divisions managed to break through, they had a lot to face here.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, field and bunker positions, tank obstacles, tank cover holes along the entire northern edge of the depression. Movements of armored and motorized units in regimental strength, direction of march generally southeast."

Down below, things were getting restless. Marching infantry sought cover, the anti-aircraft fire from Beloje had alerted them. Machine gun barrages scanned for us. Whole platoons opened fire with rifles and pistols without hitting us. What a difference to our own army units, who usually took cover first and then came too late to shoot.

Hans Heimbach lay ready to fire behind his machine guns.

"Now we're recognized anyway. Fire away, but be economical."

On the eastern edge of Penski, the muzzle flashes of light anti-aircraft fire flashed up again. We literally pressed ourselves into the cuddly terrain. 50-100 m diagonally in front of us were the explosion clouds of medium flak. They had probably misjudged the distance. The shells were also too high. After a few seconds we found cover behind some groups of trees. Then a long column, escorted by soldiers. Prisoners? Everyone threw themselves down. Now we saw the scene. Hundreds of women with shovels and pickaxes on the march to the position. Not a shot was fired, what were the poor people supposed to do?

"Pull up the northern slope."

It went up the slope like a cable car. My suspicions were confirmed: bunker after bunker between the trees. The slope was littered with wire obstacles and anti-tank obstacles that were well adapted to the normal vegetation. They were masters of camouflage. Somehow they had not yet lost their natural connection to their environment. The Iwan was excellent at adapting to the terrain. Prepared Pak positions, prepared field of fire.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, entire northern edge of the depression from Beloje to Obojan, well-developed field positions, wire and armor obstacles, prepared Pak positions. Course 100°. We are approaching Peschanoje and Pavlovsky."

We were lucky again. The numerous groups of trees offered us good protection against the repeated machine gun and anti-aircraft fire. The "comrades" only had us in their sights for a few seconds. With cat-like agility, Hein tore the machine from tree group to tree group, jumping over houses and barns.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, several cannon batteries in position east of Peschanoje. In the village mounted artillery. Heavy occupation with troops of all kinds. Troop units."

Suddenly the devil seemed to be loose. Behind the last houses in the

village, we literally fell into the light anti-aircraft guns that had been lying in wait for us. The muzzle flashes flashed around us like a wreath of a hundred thunderstorms. We were so close to the guns that we could hear the muzzle blast like the rattling of a thousand fireworks right into the aircraft. Heimbach also joined in the magic with his twin MG. That was a good thing, it dampened the desire to shoot at us, and that was always dangerous.

Two or three metallic blows, the machine roared in every joint. As if by an invisible hand, it lifted me from my seat. A window above me shattered. There was a burning pain in my right thigh. I felt something warm running down. A bullet had penetrated the pulp and grazed my thigh. It couldn't have been too bad. I could move my leg easily. There was no time to bandage it. A few more seconds and we were back under cover behind a row of trees.

Heimbach came forward:

"We have several hits in the machine!"

"Already felt it. I got hit a little. Let's keep going!"

"Instruments and rudder normal!" Hein reported.

The village of Pawlowski was situated in a depression that stretched far to the south between the hills and rose very gradually. The houses were lined up along the bottom of a stream, but also clung to the slope. A small patch, nothing more. Hein pulled the machine up close above the roofs of the houses. Wherever you looked, there were harnessed and motorized vehicles. Tracked vehicles with guns. Tank destroyers, that was it!

At the point where the narrow road leading south emerged from the forest, the Iwans were in the process of moving the Pak into position in the team platoon. To the left and right of the road were again field fortifications, anti-tank obstacles, earth bunkers, with sappers at work in between.

A few meters above the treetops, a sharp turn and over into the next hollow. Rifle and machine-gun fire from the bivouacs. Again and again long chains of approaching tracers.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, Pawlowski, infantry in regimental strength. Pak and grenade launcher batteries take up positions on the southern edge of the village."

We glided directly towards a large village, Kurasovka. Again, marching infantry who had been completely surprised by our approach. As soon as the moment of shock was over, they fired at us for all they were worth. The village was overcrowded with tanks and armored vehicles! The column stretched more than 10 km to the north, almost exclusively T-34s. An entire armored division, it seemed to me.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, Kurasowka, tank deployments in the strength of a

division, T-34 tanks. Course 360°, direction Uslan, then course for Obojan."

After a few minutes we were able to send the next message:

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, west of the Ichowatka-Obojan road Heavy artillery positions, partly not yet occupied. Well-developed field fortifications. Armored barriers. Road from Uslan approx. 50 T-34s, marching southwest. Infantry bivouacked to the left and right of the road."

Some of the tanks had anti-aircraft guns on their turrets. They started firing immediately. We thundered over them at a height of barely two meters. Some of the commanders ducked their heads. Some pulled out their pistols and shot at us.

Again the clapping of hits. Heimbach fired down burst after burst of fire.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, north bank Psel of Uslan-Trubeschbis Obojan strongly developed field fortifications, anti-tank ditches and barriers. Motorized troops in Uslan. Pak positions on the southern edge of the village. Course 70°, south of Obojan, again strong field fortifications, earth bunkers, tank obstacles, prepared anti-aircraft and Pak positions."

We didn't take our eyes off Obojan, because there was an anti-aircraft massing there the like of which had never been seen before in the Russian campaign. We came across the main Kursk-Belgorod road right at the junction of the Olkhovatka road.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, left and right of the Obojan-Belgorod road, dug-in tanks and tank artillery."

Over the Psel to the southeast. Due to the steep bend, we lost the view of the SO Obojan area for a moment.

Compared to what came next, Dante's Inferno seemed like a small firework display. We had barely reached the range of hills south of Obojan when it started. Hein and I saw the shots almost simultaneously. There must have been about twenty heavy and medium batteries that opened fire without regard for our own troops below us. The high V/O of the guns tore long spears of flame from their muzzles. All around us was a ring of explosive clouds. The explosive pressure of the shells threatened to push us to the ground. Thirty, even forty explosions almost simultaneously, only a few meters above the machine. This could not go well! Where did Hein find the calm to keep our brave "mill" on course? He couldn't just switch off.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, numerous anti-aircraft positions southeast of Obojan, approx. 20-30 batteries. Deployments of armored units in the Psel depression southeast of Obojan in division strength. On the Obojan-Belgorod road, motorized columns and armoured vehicles, marching south."

At any moment we were bound to be torn to shreds. On the hilltop in front

of us, the tops of the trees seemed to spit fire. Dozens of shells crashed among the trees and bushes. Half trees flew through the air. Horses raced out of the undergrowth. People rushed into the open, whirled through the air, hit by a hailstorm of countless splinters. We rounded a small wood. There was silence for seconds.

Approach the main road. We left them about 500 m to our right. Light and medium anti-aircraft guns on self-propelled guns scattered over a wide area. Below us, Pak position behind Pak position. Again the puffing of countless explosions. We jumped over tracked vehicles, armored personnel carriers. The crews sought cover, perplexed as to whether the fire was coming from us or from their own anti-aircraft guns. Dozens of chains of lights raced towards us. I tried to reach the handhold, but in the next second the machine had to dig itself into the ground. I threw myself back with the last of my strength. Heimbach fired as much as the barrels would allow. Cover again behind a row of trees. Finally I can pull myself back onto the seat.

A mysterious feeling had overcome me. My mind seemed to have separated from my body. I no longer felt the pain of the wound, no longer felt the tension in my muscles, no longer felt the excitement of the moment. My soul seemed to be detached from all ties to this world, floating over the battlefield all by itself, no longer carried by the metal wings of the plane, but solely by the power of a supernatural being. I saw the tanks, saw the guns, the Red Army soldiers on their horses and vehicles, the trenches and bunkers, but I felt no fear. The chains of tracer ammunition, the explosions of the shells seemed to me like a halo of lights from the heavenly hosts. I followed this spectacle unmoved. Relieved, almost cheerful, I looked at what was happening around me. Is this death? All feelings, all senses seemed to have left me. My eyes wandered over houses, trees and streets. Strangely, nothing escaped me. I took everything in, and yet it didn't touch me. Why are the Iwans running around like frightened chickens? Why this senseless shooting over a small plane? What could we do to them? Again, the flashes of countless explosions surrounded us like a wreath! It didn't scare me!

A mighty thunderclap snapped me back to life, rejoining the spirit to the body. Hein's face resembled a snow-white, bloodless mask. His eyes seemed to bore into the last light of day. The knuckles of the hands clutching the control stick were bloodless.

"What's going on? Are we hit?"

Heimbach came forward:

"The left tail unit is a sieve!"

"Hein, what's the tail unit doing?"

"React normally!"

Heimbach sighed:

"That was more than luck. Some shells were sitting right next to the tail unit! "

We had moved away from the road, probably involuntarily looking for a different route. Looking at the map, we saw the houses of Kochelowka to our left. Heavy machine-gun fire kept us at a distance. Luckily, the "comrades" had to aim at the sun, which had sunk to the horizon. The sky in the west began to glow bloodily.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, Obojan-Belgorod road, heavy truck traffic, tank traps on both sides of the road. Kochelovka, heavy Covered with armored vehicles. From the road to Height 256, deeply developed bunker positions and field fortifications. Deeply staggered obstacles. Hits in the tail unit, left tail unit mount and right wing."

As we approached Pokrovka, I heard Heimbach's excited voice:

"Attention, about Obojan hunters, could be Iwans."

"That's all we need. Are you sure?"

"Two swarms. The flak isn't firing. They must be Iwans." He had good eyes, you had to give him that.

"Now let's get out of here. Push the bottle in."

"Nothing to do, otherwise we'll dismantle it."

Hein did not allow himself to be rattled.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, enemy fighters in the Obojan area."

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, east of Pokrowka positions of light field guns, approx. 10 to 15 batteries, in between positions of light anti-aircraft guns. South of Pokrowka, deeply echeloned Pak positions, anti-tank obstacles and wire obstacles. Field positions heavily occupied. Dug-in 'Stalin organs' on both sides of the road."

The activity on the road suddenly slowed down considerably. We flew over a few more grenade launcher positions, dug-in Paks and tank artillery; then the picture changed. I looked down in amazement. Several companies of infantry were marching to the rear in battle formation. Was I dreaming, were we flying in the wrong direction? No, that wasn't it. The front trenches were cleared. We reached the crest of a ridge running north-south. A few hundred meters in front of us, Pak guns were brought into position in the platoon. The gunners pulled on long ropes, others braced themselves in the spokes of the guns. Stunned, they threw themselves to the ground and stared up at us for seconds. One of the guns began to roll backwards. Above, gun emplacement next to gun emplacement.

"Hunters from up behind!" shouted Hans Heimbach.

I was at the machine gun in one movement and loaded up. The "brothers" had spotted us after all. A pack of hounds approached us. They split up. They were obviously at a loss as to how they would get us in front of the shotgun at low level. Beginners, I could see that straight away. They began to swing nervously behind us, not getting into shooting position. Hein flew short, cunning turns just above the ground. One tried to catch us from the side, but had to pull up just before he got us in his sights. Its sheaf disappeared into the sky. They were Yak 9s, a new, very fast model with a motorized cannon protruding beyond the propeller hub. The other tried his luck from above, but in vain. The other one came after us again at lightning speed, flew a roll and wanted to let us fly through his tracer. Heimbach was quicker and put the rest of his harness right in front of his nose. The pilot was startled and came into the center of my circle. Fractions of a second later, the tracer of my MG 81 was flying towards him. He pulled up and tried to break away by swinging upwards. Tracers from all sides. What was that? There was a flash on the underside of his torso. Shreds came loose, part of the fairing flew off, black smoke billowed out of the engine. Our own quad flak fired. We were saved. The Iwan could no longer right itself from the upswing. It stalled. A few more seconds, then it hit the ground. The plane burned up in a fireball.

Quickly forward and send the last message. Below us, tank crews waving in the dusk. A look at the map.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, front near Shopino flown over. Army flak has shot down fighters. Prepared Pak positions are occupied south of Pokrovka. Dug-in tank artillery on both sides of the road. Infantry in regimental strength withdraws on a broad front from the front trenches. Stalin organs in the depression north of Visloje. Mission completed. Reporting out."

"Hein, course 260°, pull up a little so that our own flak can see us better."

One pull of the trigger of the flare gun and the colorful stars of the recognition signal lowered to the ground, signaling our arrival to everyone.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst von Husar, please come!"

It was the XLVIII Pz.-AK. What else did the comrades want from us?

"Hussar von Heinrich-Kurfürst, understood, please come!"

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, we have recorded all the reports. Get home safely. Break a leg."

"Hussar, we have understood. Thank you. Over!"

A bright streak of light still shone on the distant horizon, which quickly faded into a deep blue. The first dark veils of night already lay over the hills below us.

Exhausted, I slumped down in my seat and leaned against the cooling metal of the ribs. My mouth was dry as straw. There was an unbearable rushing sound in my ears. "White mice" flickered in front of my eyes.

Hein kept running his sleeve over his face, another sign of exhaustion. Heimbach secured his machine gun and came forward.

I turned to him:

"Don't be so reckless, we're not home yet."

"What the hell, I haven't got a shot left in the barrel, the best I can do is throw the ammunition boxes."

From the area around Golovchino, headlights suddenly scanned the sky. They caught us almost simultaneously and didn't let us go. We were bathed in blinding light. I cursed angrily:

"Those idiots, they probably still want to have us shot by night hunters."

I quickly loaded the flare pistol and fired the recognition signal again, but my comrades refused to budge. One of them stubbornly kept his beam aimed at us while the others searched the sky again.

I switched to "Send":

"Heinrich-Kurfürst to all. Tell the anti-aircraft guns around Golovchino to turn off their searchlights."

"Is our FuG 25 not working?"

I leaned backwards towards the indicator light. Everything seemed to be in order. The detection radio was working. So what was going on? I fired the recognition signal again. At last my comrades came to their senses and extinguished the "lighting".

A radio station unknown to us called in, probably the air corps, with which we had little to do.

"Heinrich-Kurfürst von Donnerkeil. Caution! An enemy aircraft has been detected in your immediate vicinity!"

We were wide awake in no time. Did the searchlight battery have a reason to switch on the fixed lighting after all? We knew that the Russians had been operating a night fighter group for about three weeks, which had so far recorded a good dozen kills. We ourselves had no losses so far, although we were very poorly equipped for night flying and had to rely more on our good eyesight and sense of direction.

Encouraged by the deployment of a so-called "night battle squadron", we had already started practicing "light" night flying in Kschen. However, we could not afford to fly blind in bad weather. After an initial aversion to these unfamiliar missions, our success wiped away all reservations and we set

about flying "night reconnaissance" with enthusiasm. We drove around the hinterland like Russian "sewing machines" and dropped our bombs, SD 50 and also SD 2, on everything that "crawled" and "glowed". If we couldn't sleep, they shouldn't either. That alone seemed reason enough for us to tackle the matter.

In contrast to the "night battle squadrons", we had hardly any difficulties. However, the reason for this was probably not so much their good will, but rather their poor training, lack of experience and the wrecked flying equipment.

It was unbelievable what was flying around: the old "Weihe" (Fw 58), the Go 145, an old training aircraft, the old He 45 and He 46, close reconnaissance aircraft that had long since been taken out of service, and, get this, the Junkers W 34, on which I myself had already flown down for a few hours. The decisive disadvantage of the undertaking seemed to me from the beginning that the crews were not given sufficient opportunity to thoroughly inspect the terrain during the day, so they had to fail at night.

I calculated the course with the "Knemeyer". With the light south-easterly wind behind us, we had to be at the site in just under twenty minutes. I switched on the PeilG 4. The acoustic display was clearly audible, albeit still faint. The visual display was also clear enough. Although I would have had no problem flying to the site with pure dead reckoning on this bright night, "double stitched" was better. It had taken us long enough to find the cause of the extreme navigation problems in the Kursk area: huge ore deposits, which made it impossible to fly purely on a compass course, especially in the area north of Kursk. Many losses among the flying units may have been due to this phenomenon.

"Course 285°, in a few minutes you can fly on with the PeilG 4."

"Elbe by Heinrich-Kurfürst, please come!"

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, come in, please."

"Elbe from Heinrich-Kurfürst, landing in 18 min. Machine damaged, otherwise everything in order."

"Heinrich-Kurfürst, have you understood? Wind 5-10 km/h from 120°. We'll only switch on the site lighting when we hear you. Be careful night fighters."

"Understood, already have warning from Thunderbolt."

I turned to Heimbach:

"Give me the first aid kit to the front!"

The wound began to burn more and more. I cut open the combination at the

seam with the jackknife, then the uniform trousers. The cloth was stiff with blood. Heimbach opened a bandage packet for me in the light of the ship's lighting and applied an emergency bandage as best he could in the confines of the pulpit.

"You've lost a lot of blood!"

"It can't be that bad, I'm in pain anyway."

Hein turned towards me:

"Temperature on the right engine is rising. Hopefully it will last a few more minutes. I'm just missing a night landing with one engine."

"You do it with ease."

"No way. Let's get this straight: one more job like this and we're divorced people, remember that. We didn't just have one guardian angel, there was a whole squadron circling around us."

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Go ahead and laugh. You know I'll go along with any spell, but this bordered on premeditated suicide."

"Come on, don't grumble. Someone had to do it. It's all over now and we're still alive. All the more reason to have another lift today. Who knows if we'll still be able to do it tomorrow."

The tension had been released. I was happy to have regained my existence, everything else became a memory. Where was the fear, where had the trembling of fear gone? It seemed to me as if the flood of liquid ore had poured out of the furnace of battle into a form of new life, hardening into supple steel.

It was resurrection, we were alive, and I was grateful for this life. We had escaped the claws of death that had tightened around us. The sweltering heat of the steel thunderstorm gave way to a warm rain of redeeming joy.

The stopwatch had run out. We had to be in the immediate vicinity of the square. We pressed the trigger of the flare gun and the colorful spheres flew to earth again. Half-left below us, barely a kilometer away, the runway lit up for seconds.

"Elbe, runway recognized."

We took off a few kilometers to the west. The runway lit up again briefly, then Hein had the "mill" on course for an approach. Flaps out, landing gear

out. We carefully approached the first row of lights. When the landing lights were switched on, the full runway lighting came on. A small correction and after a few seconds Hein touched down smoothly. The tail boom held. Even if the wing wobbled suspiciously. We followed the circling light of a handheld spotlight to our berth.

Open the access hatch. Fasten our seatbelts and parachute straps and let's get out. Breathing deeply, we take in the cool evening air.

The control room and mechanics circled the plane with flashlights. Karl searched for hits.

"Another 'mill' ready for the scrap heap."

"It can't be that bad."

"Well, lieutenant, take a look at it tomorrow. You'll be surprised."

Karl had been right. When we inspected the damage the next morning, we had every reason to scratch our ears thoughtfully. Countless splinters and around forty machine gun hits had badly damaged the bird. There really was a whole squadron of guardian angels watching over us.

While my comrades were helping me down from the surface, a private came forward:

"Lieutenant, to the command post immediately, the chief and two army staff officers are already waiting for you!"

All three of us were quite wobbly on our feet. My knees were literally shaking. It's possible that the loss of blood played a part. Walking was good for me. After barely fifty meters, my circulation got going again and I felt better.

"Crew back from hostile flight, Flerr Captain."

Captain Lunze grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Boy, did we tremble for you. The situation seemed hopeless when the divisions reported heavy anti-aircraft fire from the hinterland. That was just about all right. Thank God you're back."

That was Lunze. He breathed a sigh of relief, as if he had just stepped out of the machine himself. An attitude that was not always to his advantage.

"Let's quickly go through all the reports again. The gentlemen must return to their staffs."

He introduced me briefly! One of the officers was a Major i. G., the other a Sturmbannführer of the Waffen-SS, not much older than myself, maybe 26, with an "iron tie", as we said about the Knight's Cross.

"Your messages were not received equally well by all radio stations. The FlieVO at the II SS-Pz. corps was unable to understand some radio messages.

Our radio station received all messages up to the approach to Uslan, then the messages were also received garbled."

"I expected that, Mr. Hauptmann. This is due to the propagation conditions of the VHF. All radio stations located in a valley will have had poor reception. The XLVIII Corps radio station had good reception because it was on a hill."

Then he noticed my leg:

"You're bleeding. What's wrong?"

"Don't mention it, Captain, it's a graze shot."

"Get the doctor here now! First the wound is treated."

"Out of the question, Heimbach has put an emergency bandage on me, that's enough for now. Everything else can be done later."

The boss was still not completely satisfied:

"Whatever you say, but don't give me ifs and buts afterwards."

Captain Lunze prepared the radio messages.

"Take the image plans, then we can transmit the messages better!"

The two-week-old photographs were an ideal memory aid. Many of the field fortifications recognized today had been evaluated and transferred. So I was able to quickly reconstruct and add to message after message. Tactical signs followed tactical signs on the situation map. The two staff officers were constantly taking notes.

The Major shook his head thoughtfully:

"What do you think about the situation? Have there been any significant changes?"

"Major, I've only been back with the squadron for five days, so I don't have anything to compare it to. I would like to draw your attention to a few facts:

1. In front of the 2nd Army, we generally recognized two field fortification lines. Behind them there are only strongpoint-like installations.

2. Starting at the Proletarski-Lgov railroad line up to the front arc around Belgorod, five or more lines have been built. The ridges SW and NE of Obojan have been built up to a width of 60 km and a depth of 3 km to form an interception position. Around the frontal arc we have an unprecedented system of field fortifications and barriers with a depth of about 30-40 km.

3. The positions SW Miropolje are occupied up to the front line. Behind them are only the usual artillery masses and grenade launcher positions. Only a few Paks and anti-aircraft guns.

4. In contrast, the trenches north and NW Belgorod are hardly occupied in the front line. Yes, the Soviets have started to clear more positions today. I do not believe that these are routine reliefs. However, masses of troops of all

kinds and an unprecedented concentration of artillery are beginning behind the fourth line.

5. Armored units in the strength of at least one armored corps are located in the Psel depression southwest of Obojan and east of the Belgorod-Kursk railroad line.

6. In front of the XLVIII Pz.-AK, the II SS-Pz.-AK and the HI. Pz.-AK, deeply staggered Pak-barriers begin about 10 km behind the front. This suggests that the terrain between the front lines was heavily mined.

7. The concentration of anti-aircraft batteries of all calibers around Obojan and along the railroad line to Olshanka is on a scale that I have never experienced myself and have never heard of from others. I estimate the strength around Obojan and southeast of it at 50 heavy batteries, not counting the countless medium and light batteries. This area must therefore be of strategic importance to the Red Army.

8. The sporadic deployment of the Soviet Air Force stands in strange contrast to the reports of our long-range reconnaissance aircraft and the statements of pilots who were shot down. Four air armies have considerable combat power.

9. Neither the deployment of units of Air Fleet 4 nor of units of Air Fleet 6 has so far succeeded in disrupting or preventing the Soviet advance in the long term.

10. This all confirms the suspicion that was already voiced in the preparatory meeting in the afternoon: the opponent knows our intentions or at least judges them correctly."

Everyone bent over the map in silence. The Major said thoughtfully:

"Then we've got a lot to look forward to tomorrow. In any case, thank you for your commitment."

A nice gesture. When the two staff officers had left the room, Lieutenant Gerth came in and joined us at the chart table. The chief's eyes kept wandering over the records:

"We all agree on the assessment. Why can't we do that with senior management?"

"Captain, as a lieutenant, I'm not entitled to criticize, and I haven't witnessed the developments of the last few weeks; under the circumstances, I think an attack would be sheer madness."

Gerth hissed sarcastically:

"Great, lieutenant, but teach that to a general for once. Excuse me, but that had to come out!"

Although my exhaustion was becoming more and more noticeable, I didn't

let up:

"The expected losses are disproportionate to the success. If we look at the last aerial photographs of the deeply developed positional systems, it must have looked like this before Verdun in the First World War. It is a complete mystery to me why our leadership was so committed to the Kursk arc. We have robbed ourselves of any strategic initiative. Why are the pincers being applied here? Why choose the enemy's weakest point? But here we are facing far superior forces. This planning contradicts all previous leadership decisions.

Let's take a moment to compare the reports from NAG 15, NAG 10, NAG 4 and NAG 6. The movements detected run like clockwork. No fools are in charge over there, they've thought of something. But if that's the case, the Ivan knows exactly what our intentions and plans are.

Why the massing in front of the three armored corps? Why the deeply echeloned pak blocks? Why the evacuation of the forward field positions? Do they perhaps even know that a relief attack is planned for tomorrow afternoon? The strong operational tank reserves in the depth of the area. The concentration of more than four air armies. We are in for a real surprise.

We should not hesitate for a minute and immediately inform the two army groups and the Führer's headquarters.

Any good train driver to whom I show the aerial photographs will tell me immediately: 'I'll be careful not to march even one step north on the taxiway!'\* He instinctively recognizes the purpose of the tank massing southwest of Obojan and east of the Kursk-Belgorod railroad line. The enemy's measures are no accident. But what the hell, Captain, it's too late to order the whole thing to stop anyway, although that would be the only correct conclusion."

Lunze said goodbye to me:

"First of all, thank you very much. You will go to the doctor immediately. In the meantime, I will send the result to the group, for information, FlieVO 2nd and 4th Army. One thing has become clear to me today and I'm sure to you too: the decision will be made here and in the next few days. If we don't succeed in destroying the enemy, nothing will stop the Red Army."

I signed out. The troop doctor treated the gunshot wound in the medical tent, which turned out to be a harmless flesh wound. However, a blood vessel had been damaged. Tired and exhausted, I sat down with the rest of the flying personnel at the dinner table, which was provisionally lit by a kerosene lamp. Nobody thought about sleep. Everyone knew that in the early morning of the day after next the most violent firestorm of this war would break out. In the

late afternoon of the following day, divisions of the XLVIII. AK were to try to achieve a more favorable starting position for the large-scale attack as part of a limited operation. For countless Landsers, the sun might have sent out its rays for the last time today, providing the last warmth on the way to the cold of eternity.

We talked about the experiences of the last enemy flights. I Heinz Holzhey and Hans Heimbach had already described the most important details of our flight.

"Do you really believe that our intentions have become known to Ivan?" Lieutenant Gerth asked me.

"After what we have seen, one can no longer speak of 'believing'<sup>(1)</sup>. In any case, the 'comrades' over there know more than the little that can be gleaned from occasional prisoner statements, radio and telephone surveillance and agents close to the front."

Gerth jumped up in anger:

"It must not be true. It can't be. Do you understand me? Then Joch was all for nothing again!"

In the evening of the next day, we were sitting in the command post summarizing the reports and reconnaissance results when a captain from the LIL AK staff entered. He wanted to find out what we had learned that day and had been instructed to give us key documents and message boards that would be used the following day. Captain Lunze asked him whether anything was known about the outcome of today's operation at XLVIII. AK was known.

"As far as we know, the divisions achieved the ordered objectives. The commanders did not have the impression that the enemy was prepared for our attack. The prisoners brought in were very surprised by our attack."

"What do you think?" he turned to me.

"One look at the map is enough. The ordered attack strip is not the actual focus of our attack. If we were not to thwart the enemy's intentions, his defense would have to begin in the front line. Besides, no one would believe that the Soviet leadership would disclose intelligence of such importance down to the battalion level."

"You may be right," said the army officer, "but until the opposite is proven, we have to proceed from the known facts."

On the morning of July 5, at around 2.45 a.m., the hand sirens blared and the

alarm bells rang. Still overdressed, we threw on our clothes. A few seconds later, the field telephone at our mooring buzzed:

"Strong enemy bomber, attack aircraft and fighter units approaching our area. Evacuation alert. Aircraft away from the area!"

Within the next few hours, the most violent air battle of the war developed. Devastating losses on both sides, but the Soviets had achieved their objective. The Luftwaffe dropped out to support the initial attack operations. Despite huge successes, the Luftwaffe had been badly hit.

We sat together in silence over our morning coffee. Only Gerth broke the silence:

"So you were right after all, but what does such a lousy lieutenant have to say?"

Captain Lunze added cynically:

"Being right and being right are two different things, gentlemen. Remember that."